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PAGE 189

ISAAC

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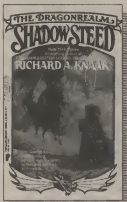


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A WORD FROM BRIAN THOMSEN



"Open the pod bay doors, HAL!"

It is easy to become paranoid about the proliferation of computers

in the different aspects of everyday life. Telephones, security, banking, etc., have all been automated. Touch a button and poof! It's done.

Machines may not be smarter than us but they

certainly are faster.

I sometimes worry about the day we cede all control to computers (as a crow would on a generation ship like *GOLDEN FLEECE*). I know I don't want to be in the position of 2001's Dave Bowman—on the outside and trying to get in before the air runs out.

When you see me around ask me if I use a computer or wordprocessor, and just see if my answer computes.

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SCIENCE FICTION

MAGAZINE

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January 1991
Next issue on sale
January 8, 1991

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Published every 28 days with special issues in April and November by Davis Publications, Inc. at \$2.50 per copy (\$2.95 per copy in Canada). One year subscription \$34.95 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries \$39.65, payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscriptions and all other correspondence about them, P.O. Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51566. For back issues send \$3.50 to Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, P.O. Box 40, Vernon, NJ 07462. Address for all editorial matters: Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Avenue, NY, NY 10168-0035. Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine® is the registered trademark of Davis Publications, Inc. © 1990 by Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10168-0035. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope, the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Second class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian third class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. POSTMASTER, send change of address to Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51566 in Canada return to 1801 South Cameron, Windsor, Ontario N9B 3E1. ISSN 0162-2188.

EDITORIAL

SIMILE



by Isaac Asimov

Every once in a while, a letter arrives in which the correspondent tries to teach me English. I welcome that, for as I said in my June 1990 editorial, "English," I really don't know the rules of grammar very well, and I am always willing to learn.

However, it does take a certain amount of courage to try to teach me the language just the same because I have a feel for it that has been sharpened by long, long practice, and generally, I know what I'm saying.

Thus, in my April 1990 editorial, entitled "Posthumous," I made the following statement concerning my attitude toward my writing—

"It is an addiction more powerful than alcohol, than nicotine, than crack."

This was picked up by a reader from California who declared that I was wrong to say that. He said, "How could you make an analogy between writing and drug-using? Analogies are for comparing things which are similar in principle."

He can call it an analogy if he wishes, but I was making use of a figure of speech called a "simile." Simile comes from the Latin and

means "similar" or "like," so that I admit I was stressing the similarity of two different matters.

In the Mid-December 1989 issue I had an editorial entitled "Metaphor" in which I pointed out the use of that figure of speech in stressing similarity. A metaphor does so implicitly; a simile does so explicitly. When Coleridge in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" speaks of "the bloody sun at noon," he is making use of a metaphor. If he had said, "the sun at noon was like blood," he would be using a simile. The presence of "like" or "as" is the usual, but not invariable, giveaway of the simile.

A metaphor is more colorful, more emotion-stirring, but it can be obscure and confusing. A simile is more pedestrian but it is not likely to be misunderstood. Which you use depends on what you are writing and what you are trying to do.

What I chose was a simile for, unless I am emotionally stirred, I tend to write simply. Of course, I didn't use "like" or "as." Instead I said (if I may simplify my statement in order to make it easier to discuss), "Writing is an addiction

more powerful than crack." (Remember I am talking about *me*, not about the world in general, or even writers in general.) That is equivalent to saying "Writing is an addiction like crack, only more so." There's your "like."

Still, does calling the sentence a simile change matters? Am I allowed, in a simile, to compare two things which my California correspondent thinks are not "similar in principle"?

Let us, therefore, turn to the good book, by which I mean *Webster's Unabridged*, 2nd edition. The first definition it gives under "simile" is this:

"A figure of speech by which one thing, action, or relation is likened or explicitly compared in one or more aspects, often with 'as' or 'like,' to something of different kind or quality; an imaginative comparison."

Notice that it says "often with 'as' or 'like.'" It doesn't say always, and I think that "more than" and "less than" will fulfill the function of "like" merely by modifying the equality implied by "like" in one direction or another. Notice also that the definition says that the comparison is with something of *different* kind or quality, and that it is an *imaginative* comparison. If we can only compare one thing to another that is virtually the same, the entire value of the figure of speech disappears. I would be reduced to saying something like "Crack is like cocaine!" or "Writing is like making marks on paper."

EDITORIAL: SIMILE

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Of course, you might argue that you can't go by dictionary definitions alone, that those are just the crackling sounds made by dry academics.

In that case, let us turn to Shakespeare. As far as I'm concerned the English language *is* Shakespeare, and vice versa (barring certain words and phrases that have been made archaic by the passage of four centuries).

Consider the harsh scene in which Hamlet suspects Ophelia of having willingly connived with her father and the King in spying on him and he is, therefore, in an agony of disillusionment, as cruel to her as he can be.

At one point, he says, "be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny."

Now what does Shakespeare mean when he says "chaste as ice"? He is using a figure of speech, a simile, and he is saying that there is a similarity between chastity and ice. I'm sure that my California correspondent would be as ready to correct Shakespeare as he was to correct me, for he would point out that chastity and ice are not at all similar in principle and therefore cannot be compared.

Chastity, after all, is a human characteristic; it describes the behavior a person who avoids all sexual contact because he or she finds it illegal, or immoral, or merely distasteful. Ice, on the other hand, is not human; it is not even alive; it has no connection with sex at all; and cannot conceivably be either

chaste or promiscuous. Then what the devil is Shakespeare talking about?

Well, "cold" has two important meanings. It can be used to describe a person who is not moved by passion, while "hot" is used of someone who is entirely driven by passion. We speak of "cold-blooded" and "hot-blooded." Now that, in itself, is a metaphor, for it cannot be taken literally. The blood temperature of a man in a rage is essentially the same as that of a man who is very calm. It is only that a raging person can be so easily pictured as having his blood boiling within him and making him sizzle and bubble with oaths and threats, while a serene person has his blood flowing coolly and equably.

Literally, this makes no sense, of course, but figuratively we know *exactly* what hot and cold mean when used in this metaphoric fashion.

The other important meaning of cold is the literal one of possessing a low temperature, and ice is the most common naturally occurring substance that is always low in temperature.

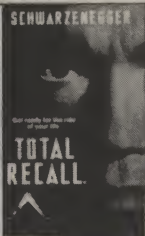
What Shakespeare is saying, then, is "As chaste [lacking in passion] as ice [low in temperature]," in other words "as cold as cold." Everyone who hears or reads the simile knows exactly what Shakespeare means. In fact, it is difficult to think of any four other words that would express Shakespeare's meaning at this point in quite so strong and dramatic a fashion.

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To use another example. In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare has Jaques make his famous "All the world's a stage" speech and in it he refers to a lover "sighing like furnace."

Why like furnace?

To be sure, in these days of central heating, I have not had much recent opportunity to listen to a furnace, but I seem to recall that, in addition to the crackling of wood, a kind of wind-noise is made as the heated air rises up the chimney. One might view the furnace as sighing not because it is breathing in human fashion, or because it feels sad in human fashion, but simply because it makes a noise which if viewed *imaginatively* (remember Webster's definition) sounds like a human sigh.

But then why compare the love with the furnace rather than with the wind, or a bellows, or a child blowing through a pipe? Because it is Shakespeare's way of implying that the lover is hot with passion (there's that meaning of "hot" again) and only a furnace can produce the necessary picture.

In his twenty-ninth sonnet, Shakespeare says that when he is in despair, he has only to think of his sweet love and "my state, / like to the lark at break of day arising / from sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate." Come on, now, Shakespeare isn't flying and nei-

ther is any part of him, but he *compares* his state of mind on thinking of his love to the flying, singing, rising lark in such a powerful simile that no one reading it is likely to forget it easily.

It is figures of speech that give written English its color, its taste, its fragrance; abolish them with overgrown literalism and you reduce language to "Me, Tarzan; you, Jane."

—Now in writing these occasional editorials on the English language and the techniques of writing, I don't forget that I am speaking to many readers who have dreams of writing themselves someday or are actually trying to do so.

Don't let yourself be taken aback by all this erudition. You don't have to think all this through to write properly. People who have a *feel* for the language can use figures of speech without having to reason it out, and we can hope that you're one of them. For more tips on this subject, you may want to look for a collection of essays on *Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy* that have been selected by the editors of *IASfm* and *Analog*. This book will be out from St. Martin's Press in May.

Of course, there are people without the feel for the language and I'm afraid that there nothing can be done. ●



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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov:

As a "little immigrant" to the United States, whose native language was not English, I started reading science fiction books and magazines written in English, and I became completely hooked by the genre.

Most science fiction I have read, translated into another language from English, definitely loses something in the translation.

As an avid reader of two SF monthly publications (not to mention numerous books), let me just say that I prefer yours by far. Not only does your selection of stories hold me in thrall, but my English has improved immeasurably. Please keep up the splendid work.

Vincenzo Pugliese
Pittsburgh, PA

Well, there you are. In fifty years of extolling science fiction I missed its role in helping establish English as a global language. Thank you.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,
Dear Mr. Brooks Jr.,

I write this letter because of Mr. Brooks' very interesting letter on cross-gender first-person stories in the March 1990 issue of the *IASfm*. I must confess I've been through

this myself somewhat, so I thought to submit my own conjectures on this topic.

One of the more formidable tasks a science fiction writer can set oneself is to describe an alien psyche and society from *its* point of view. If the writer succeeds, the results may be very interesting indeed. A good way of training oneself could be starting out by writing a first-person story in the opposite sex. The authors who succeed in setting up their stories convincingly enough to trick experienced readers like Mr. Brooks and myself into believing we know who the first person is should be proud of their skills.

By the way, would you trust an SF writer who sets out to describe to you "the many-tentacled slime from the swamp-infested Crafty-globglob" (now where ever did I get that from?) but can't describe the soul of his own wife?

That reminds me! the "soft" departments of the morning papers in my country are right now crammed with men confessing that "we don't understand women, we never did, and we despair of ever doing so. . . ." So perhaps this isn't an easy start after all. Which brings me to the benefits of cross-gender stories to the reader.

To take things for granted seems to be a very human thing. I recall

reading *Dreamsnake* by Vonda McIntyre. After a chapter or two I almost fell out of my chair, realizing that the protagonist was a she. What an eye-opener! (I never knew my face could go pink all the way down to my navel.)

To run across such a thing in a book is of course not so risky, even though you may have to re-read the story. To do so in reality may be somewhat riskier, as this story may tell: A foreign delegation was meeting in Europe with, among others, a delegation from my country, Sweden. The leader of the foreign delegation was introduced to a female member of the Swedish delegation. All he heard was "secretary . . ." so he promptly refused to talk to a "simple secretary." Only she was Secretary of State, and so a very high-ranking member of that delegation. Thus he unwittingly sorely insulted my country. I wonder what he would have done if he had read as many cross-gender stories as Mr. Brooks and I have?

So please, Mr. Brooks, go on reading cross-gender stories. If you learn to take them in your stride, you'll have a tremendous advantage in communication.

Talking about taking things for granted. I think one of the most important scientific principles may be "Never take anything for granted." So it may be that reading cross-gender first-person stories can help train us in working with scientific principles.

Please feel free to comment on this letter!

Rolf Strömberg
Stockholm
Sweden

Excellent! My view entirely.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

You missed George Brooks, Jr.'s point in your response to his letter in the March issue. He complained that when authors write in the first person, they ought to mention it early on if the protagonist is not of their gender. You told him Mark Twain was a middle-aged sophisticate when he wrote *Huck Finn*, that there's nothing wrong with a first-person story that doesn't mirror the nature of the author, and that he should disregard the author and read the story. You're right, but that isn't what he *said*.

He didn't say he wanted the protagonist to be the same sex as the author, he just said he wants to know what sex the protagonist is. Seems reasonable to me. Unlike Mr. Brooks, I've learned to read first-person stories with a sort of doubled identity till I'm told what sex "I" am, so I'm not as bothered as I once was by authors who are slow to tell me. But this produces a barrier to identification with the protagonist that can reduce the impact of the story's opening almost as much as suddenly discovering that "I" am not who I thought "I" was can do, so I'm awfully grateful to those authors kind enough to let me know early on.

I haven't read Twain in years, but I think he let us know pretty darn quickly that Huck was not a middle-aged sophisticate, yeah?

A lot of people tend to assume (unless or until told otherwise) that a first-person protagonist is the same sex as the author, not because

they necessarily want him/her to be, but because they want to establish the identity of "I." Gender is a pretty important part of a person's identity, most places.

If, having made this assumption, one is identifying quite happily with a woman, and is suddenly transformed into a man (or vice versa) on page five or ten, in a story that isn't about gender changes or gender confusion . . . well, what's the point? I'm willing to be any sex at all for the purpose of good fiction, but unless I'm meant to be confused about it, why confuse me? Why not just let me know as soon as possible what sex "I" am?

I thought all this out years ago, have since made it a point to establish the gender of my first-person protagonists as soon as possible (unless I've a good reason not to), and would never have bothered to write to you or to anyone else about it, but your response to Mr. Brooks vexed me. Since you didn't seem to hear his complaint, I thought I'd add my voice to it.

You're usually more attentive than that. What were you thinking of, for goodness' sake?

Melisa Michaels
Kailua, HI

There are times when you might want to keep gender undercover. For instance, you might bring a murderer on the scene and not wish the reader to be able to narrow it down to male or female. Or you might want to demonstrate that a person's gender is unimportant under particular circumstances. It's never safe to make rules in writing too hard and fast.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Your magazine came yesterday. After weeks of waiting, and impatience with the *TV Guide* (I don't want the *TV Guide*, I want my *IAsfm!*), it finally came: my very own first issue of your magazine.

I applaud your sentiments on speaking for science fiction in your editorial of the May 1990 issue. I have been reading SF since the mid 1950s.

Then, I read the Letters section. That's what really prompted my letter. Sir, I think you should stick by your convictions, or sentiments, or taste, or experience, rather than meekly yield to M. Greek's opinion. M. Greek of Chicago, IL is entitled to his or her opinion about sex in science fiction, or any other literature. You are certainly entitled to your opinion about sex in your magazine. I am an omnivorous and voracious reader. And, in all my readings, I have yet to come across graphic sex that was necessary to what I was reading. I have found some nongraphic sex pertinent to some story line, or plot, or other need of some writings that I have read. However, I find the bulk of M. Greek's rationale to be flimsy indeed.

In any attempt at writing of my own, I keep in mind Mark Twain's attitude. He said he could have written a lot of sexy stuff, and been published long before he was published. But, he refrained. Because, when he ever did become a recognized writer, he wanted an unsullied reputation. That's not his exact words, but that is true to his meaning.

I may never be published, but I

shall retain an unsullied reputation; and, I hope your magazine does, too.

Thank you,

Don D. Snow
Fort Worth, TX

I can't speak for other writers or for public taste. I can guarantee only myself and you'll never find graphic sex in my fiction. (Limericks, of course, are another matter.)

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

As I receive your magazine monthly, I sit and ponder (even before I open it) about what your editorial will be concerning. And as always, that is the first item I turn to. I usually hope that it's about evolution or your view on life, either yours or life in general. The following are a few comments on your editorials concerning, in some way or another, those subjects which I have named.

The first is your editorial in your November 1989 issue, "Half-Done." I found it very informing in the evolutionary terms. It will help me in my next "Evolution Revolution," which is an argument with a friend about which is correct, creation or evolution. He's on the side of creation and is hard to persuade in his beliefs. Your interpretation of evolution in that editorial may give me some more ground to stand on in my next arguments with him. Using (if I may say) a "fractional universe time" in relation to other events made it easier for me to understand the process of evolution.

The second editorial is found in your April 1990 issue. I feel that

your critic had no right to say that you emphasized sex too much. I'd bet we could find books in his personal library that had more sex in them. Also, why should you stop writing now? I feel you're on a roll with your Azazel stories and your non-fiction work. Every one of my closest friends (including the same one I have my fights with) would agree to that. We both felt your Foundation series was very successful and entertaining. If people don't want you to write and publish, they just simply don't have to read you. But I'm sure millions of people will continue to read your stories and novels with the same fascination that they've had for years.

Thank you,

Matt Rupert
Cooperstown, PA

PS: I commend your magazine on publishing Joe Haldeman's "The Hemingway Hoax." I found it very interesting.

Please! Don't think I'll ever stop writing while I'm alive, no matter what people may demand. For me writing is identical to life.

—Isaac Asimov

Dr. Asimov,

In the April 1990 issue of *IASfm*, you discuss and reject the possibility of hoarding your writings until your death so that your survivors may publish them posthumously and become rich. I wonder if you have considered another possible course of action. I believe it was Karl Fredrich Gauss who resolved to produce enough material to keep

his publisher busy for a century after Gauss' death. Since the nineteenth century, I dare say that publishers have become sufficiently fast as to make this an unattainable goal, even for you. Indeed, Gauss' publisher was only kept busy for sixty years. However, might you consider a somewhat shorter period of time during which to keep your publisher's presses busy? Say thirty years . . . Sincerely,

Joseph Lazio
Ithaca, NY

Believe me, I've done my best to saturate the market, but I can only rarely stay more than twelve or so books ahead of the publishers and that's only a year's supply.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Crew:

My boss, Chuck Catlett, saw me carting around your April issue at work, and instead of firing me, he asked me to read Joe Haldeman's story, "The Hemingway Hoax" first, because he hadn't understood it.

I read the first seventy pages, thinking "what's so hard to understand?" Then—just as in Keith Laumer's *Dinosaur Beach*—Joe Haldeman kicks into overdrive and leaves me with a sense of having missed something. Ah, well, I nevertheless thank him for writing it. I really enjoyed reading it.

It might interest him that one hundred thousand factorial is not "ten to the godzillionth power," but rather the much more modest ten to the 456573.450899970908360663394094748 (approximately). But, then, Mr. Haldeman himself

showed that the STAB agent wasn't as omniscient as he claimed.

Cheerfully,

Lyle Wiedeman
Santa Ana, CA

It depends on how big a godzillionth is. If it represents the power exerted by Godzilla in electron-volts over its extended lifetime, it might not be too bad. (No, please don't calculate it.)

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Why is it that the stories in *IASfm* are written in one column, rather than two? The editorials are written in the easier-to-read two column format. Has this question been posed before? I've only been reading *IASfm* consistently for the last fifteen months, perhaps there is a good reason of which I am unaware.

Yours,

J'aime Cobb
546 S. Villa Ave.
Villa Park, IL 60181-2772

I'll leave this one for sweet Sheila because I don't know the answer.

—Isaac Asimov

*We feature two different types of columns in *IASfm* because we want to distinguish the editorial material from the fiction and because we believe a variety of styles within the pages of the magazine makes *IASfm* more interesting to look at. Personally, having proofread both the single- and the double-column format for years, I've found the former style easier to read.*

—Sheila Williams

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HAS NEVER
BEEN FUNNIER."

-CLIVE BARKER

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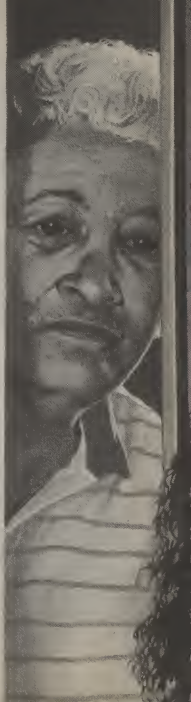
WORKMAN

POGROM

by James
Patrick Kelly

"Pogrom" is set in Durham, New Hampshire, the author's hometown, and, while it is meant to be read on its own, it is also offered as a companion piece to his dramatic story, "Home Front" (June 1988). The tale is part of an anthology about hometowns, *Fires of the Past*, which will soon be available from St. Martin's Press.

art: John Johnson



FOR A NICKLE
I
WILL

DROO

RU



Matt was napping when Ruth looked in on him. He had sprawled across the bedspread with his clothes on, shoes off. His right sock was worn to gauze at the heel. The pillow had crimped his gray hair at an odd angle. She had never seen him so peaceful before, but then she had never seen him asleep. She had the eye zoom for a close-up. His mouth was slack and sleep had softened the wrinkles on his brow. Ruth had always thought him handsome but forbidding, like the cliffs up in Crawford Notch. Now that he was dead to the world, she could almost imagine him smiling. She wondered if there were anything she could say to make him smile. He worried too much, that man. He blamed himself for things he had not done.

She increased the volume of her wall. His breathing was scratchy but regular. They had promised to watch out for one another; there were not many of them left in Durham. Matt had given Ruth a password for his homebrain when they had released him from the hospital. He seemed fine for now. She turned out the lights he had left on, but there was nothing else she could see to do for him. She did not, however, close the electronic window which opened from her apartment on Church Hill onto his house across town. It had been years since she had heard the sounds of a man sleeping. If she shut her eyes, it was almost as if he were next to her. His gentle snoring made a much more soothing background than the gurgle of the mountain cascade she usually kept on the wall. She was not really intruding, she told herself. He had asked her to check up on him.

Ruth picked up the mystery she had been reading but did not open it. She studied his image as if it might be a clue to something she had been trying to remember. Matt moaned and his fingers tightened around the cast that ran from his right hand to his elbow. She thought he must have started dreaming, because his face closed like a door. He rolled toward the eye and she could see the bruise on his cheek, blood-blue shading to brown.

"Someone is approaching," said Ruth's homebrain.

"The groceries?"

"The visitor is not on file."

"Show me," Ruth said.

The homebrain split Matt's window and gave her a view of the front porch. A girl she had never seen before, holding two brown paper Shop 'n' Save sacks, pressed the doorbell with her elbow.

She was about thirteen and underfed, which meant she was probably a drood. She had long glitter hair and the peeling red skin of someone who did not pay enough attention to the UV forecasts. Her arms were decorated with blue stripes of warpaint. Or maybe they were tattoos. She

was wearing sneakers, no socks, jeans, and a T-shirt with a picture of Jesus Hitler that said "For a nickel I will."

"Hello?" said Ruth. "Do I know you?"

"Your stuff." She shifted the sacks in her arms as if she were about to drop them.

"Where's Jud? He usually delivers for me."

"C'mon, lady! Not arguin' with no fuckin' door." She kicked at it. "Hot as nukes out here."

"I don't know who you are."

"See these sacks? Costin' you twenty-one fifty-three."

"Please show me your ID."

"Shit, lady." She plunked the sacks down on the porch, brushed sweat from her face, pulled a card from her pocket and thrust it toward the eye in the door. The homebrain scanned and verified it. But it did not belong to her.

"That's Jud's card," said Ruth.

"He busy, you know, so he must give it to me." One of the sacks fell over. The girl nudged a box of dishwasher soap with her sneaker. "You want this or not?" She knelt, reached into the sack and tossed a bag of onion bagels, a bottle of liquid Pep, a frozen whitefish, two rolls of toilet paper, and a bunch of carrots into a pile on the middle of the porch.

"Stop that!" Ruth imagined the neighbors were watching her groceries being abused. "Wait there."

The girl wagged a package of Daffy Toes at the eye. "Gimme cookie for my tip?"

Ruth hesitated before she pressed her thumb against the printreader built into the steel door. What was the point in having all these security systems if she was going to open up for strangers? This was exactly the way people like her got hurt. But it *was* Ruth's order, and the girl looked too frail to be any trouble.

She smelled of incense. A suspicion of sweet ropy smoke clung to her clothes and hair. Ruth was tempted to ask what it was, but realized that she probably did not want to know. The latest in teen depravity, no doubt. The smell reminded her of when she was in college back in the sixties and she used to burn incense to cover the stink of pot. Skinny black cylinders of charcoal that smeared her fingers and smelled like a Christmas tree on fire. Ruth followed the girl into the kitchen, trying to remember the last time she had smoked pot.

The girl set the bags out on the counter and then sighed with pleasure. "Been wantin' all day to get into some A/C." She surveyed the kitchen as if she were hoping for an invitation to dinner. "Name's Chaz." She waited in vain for Ruth to introduce herself. "So, want me to unpack?"

"No." Ruth took her wallet out of her purse.

"Lots of 'em ask me to. They too old, or too lazy—hey, real costin' *wine*." She pulled a Medoc from the rack mounted under the china cabinet and ran her finger along the stubby shoulder. "In glass bottles. You rich or what?"

Ruth held out her cash card but Chaz ignored it.

"Bet you think I lie. You 'fraid I come here to do your bones?" She hefted the bottle of Bordeaux by the neck, like a club.

Alarmed, Ruth clutched at her chest and squeezed the security pager that hung on a silver chain under her blouse. "Put that down." The eye on the kitchen ceiling started broadcasting live to the private cops she subscribed to. Last time they had taken twenty minutes to come.

"Don't worry," Chaz grinned. "I deliver plenty stuff before. In Portsmouth. Then we lose our house, got move to Durham. Nice town you got here." She set the bottle back on the counter. "But you can't hear nothin' I say, right? You scared 'cause kids hate you but I ain't breaking your head, am I? Not today, anyway. Just wanna earn my fuckin' nickel, lady."

"I'm trying to pay you." Ruth pushed the card at her.

She took it. "Place full of costin' shit like this." She shook her head in wonder at Ruth's wealth. "You lucky, you know." She rubbed the card against the port of Jud Gazzara's Shop 'n' Save ID to deduct twenty-one dollars and fifty-three cents. "Yeah, this is great, compare to dorms. You ever see dorms inside?"

"No."

"You oughta. Compare to dorms, this is heaven." Chaz handed the card back. "No, better than heaven, 'cause you can buy this, but you gotta die to get heaven. Gimme my cookie?" she said.

"Take it and leave."

Chaz paused on the way out and peeked into the living room. "This walter what you do for fun, lady?" Matt was still asleep on the wall. "Jeez, you pigs good as dead already."

"Would you please go?"

"Wake up, walter!" She yelled at the screen. "*Hustle or die!*"

"Huh!" Matt jerked as if he had been shot. "What?" He curled into a ball, protecting his face with the cast.

"Give nasty, you get nasty." Chaz winked at Ruth. "See you next week, lady."

"Greta, is that you?"

Ruth could hear Matt calling to his dead wife as she shouldered the door shut. She braced her back against it until she felt the homebrain click the bolts into place.

"Greta?"

"It's me," she called. "Ruth." She squeezed the security pager again

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to call the private cops off. At least she could avoid the charge for a house call. Her heart hammered against her chest.

"Ruth?"

She knew the girl was out there laughing at her. It made Ruth angry, the way these kids made a game of terrorizing people. "Turn your wall on, Matt." It was not fair; she was no pig.

By the time Ruth got into the living room, Matt was sitting on the edge of his bed. He seemed dazed, as if he had woken up to find himself still in the nightmare.

"You asked me to check in on you," she said. "Remember? Sorry if I disturbed you." She decided not to tell him—or anyone—about Chaz. Nothing had happened, really. So the world was full of ignorant little bigots, so what? She could hardly report a case of rudeness to the Durham cops; they thought people like her complained too much as it was. "Did you have a nice nap?" Ruth was not admitting to anyone that she was afraid of trash like Chaz.

"I was having a dream about Greta," said Matt. "She gave me a birthday cake on a train. We were going to some city, New York or Boston. Then she wanted to get off but I hadn't finished the cake. It was big as a suitcase."

Ruth had never understood why people wanted to tell her their dreams. Most of the ones she had heard were dumb. She could not help but be embarrassed when otherwise reasonable adults prattled on about their nighttime lunacies. "How are you feeling?" She nestled into her favorite corner of the couch. "Do you need anything?"

"What was funny was that Greta wouldn't help me." He had not noticed how he was annoying her. "I mean, I told her to have some cake but she wouldn't. She screamed at me to hurry up or I'd die. Then I woke up."

What had Chaz called him? A walter. Ruth had never heard that one before. "Sorry," she said, "I really didn't mean to intrude. I should let you get back to sleep."

"No, don't go." He slid his feet into the slippers next to the bed. "I'd like some company. I just lay down because there was nothing else to do." He grunted as he stood, then glanced in the mirror and combed hair back over his bald spot with his fingers. "See, I'm up."

He turned away and waved for her to follow. The eye tracked along the ceiling after him as he hobbled down the hall to his office, a dark shabby room decorated with books and diplomas. He lived in only three rooms: office, bedroom and kitchen. The rest of his house was closed down.

"I'm pretty useless these days." He eased behind the antique steel desk he had brought home from his office when they closed the university. "No typing with this damn cast on. Not for six, maybe seven weeks." He

picked up a manuscript, read the title, dropped it back on a six inch stack next to the computer. "Nothing to do."

Next he would get melancholy, if she let him. "So dictate."

"I'm too old to think anymore without my fingers on a keyboard and a screen to remind me what I just wrote." He snorted in disgust. "But you didn't call to hear me complain. You've been so good, Ruth. To pay so much attention and everything. I don't know why you do it."

"Must be your sunny personality, Matt." Ruth hated the way he had been acting since they released him from the hospital. So predictable. So sad. "I'm cooking my mom's famous gefilte fish. Maybe I'll bring some over later? And a bottle of wine?"

"That's sweet, but no. No, you know how upset you get when you go out." He grinned. "You just stay safe where you are."

"This is my town, too. And yours. I've lived here thirty-two years. I'm not about to let them take it away from me now."

"We lost it long ago, Ruth. Maybe it's time we acknowledged that."

"Really? Can I stop paying property taxes?"

"You know, I understand the way they feel." He tapped the keyboard at random with his good hand. "The world's a mess; it's not their fault that they're homeless. They watch the walls in the dorms and they see all the problems and they need someone to blame. So they call us pigs and we call them droods. Much simpler that way."

"So what are you going to do? Send them a thank you note for crippling you? Breaking your arm? Wake up and listen to yourself, Matt. You shouldn't have to hide in your house like a criminal. You didn't do anything."

"Yes, that's it exactly. I didn't do anything. Maybe it's time."

"Damn it, don't start *that* again! You're a teacher, you worked hard." Ruth grabbed a pillow she had embroidered. She wanted to hurl it right through the wall and knock some sense into the foolish old man. "God, I don't know why I bother." Instead she hugged it to her chest. "Sometimes you make me mad, Matt. I mean really angry."

"I'm sorry, Ruth. I'm just in one of my moods. Maybe I should call you back when I'm better company?"

"All right," she said without enthusiasm. "I'll talk to you later then."

"Don't give up on me, Ruth."

She wiped him off the wall. He was replaced by Silver Cascade Brook up in Crawford Notch. She had reprocessed the loop from video she had shot years ago, before she had had to stop traveling. Water burbled, leaves rustled, birds sang. "Chirp, chirp," she said sourly and zapped it. Afloat on the Oeschinenensee in the Alps. *Zap*. Coral gardens off the Caribbean coast of St. Lucia. *Zap*. Exotic birds of the Everglades. *Zap*. She flipped restlessly through her favorite vacations; nothing pleased her.

Finally she settled on a vista of Mill Pond across the street. The town swans cut slow V's across the placid surface. In the old days, when she used to sit on the porch, she could hear frogs in the summertime. She was tempted to drag her rocker out there right now. Then she would call Matt, just to show him it could still be done.

Instead she went into the kitchen to unpack the groceries. She put the dishwasher soap under the sink and the cookies in the bread drawer. Matt was a crotchety old man, ridden with guilt, but he and she were just about the last ones left. She picked up the whitefish, opened the freezer, then changed her mind. When was the last time she had seen Margie or Stanley What's-His-Name, who lived just two doors down? Ruth closed the door again, stripped the shrinkwrap from the fish and popped it into the microwave to defrost. If she were afraid to show him, Matt would end up like all the others. He would stop calling or move or die and then Ruth would be a stranger in her own home town. When the whitefish thawed she whacked off the head, skinned and boned it. She put the head, skin, and bones in a pot, covered them with water, cut in some carrots and onion and set it on the stove to boil. She was not going to let anyone make her a prisoner in her own kitchen. She ground the cleaned fish and some onions together, then beat in matzo meal, water, and a cup of ovobinder. Her mom's recipe called for eggs but uncontaminated eggs were hard to find. She formed the fish mixture into balls and bravely dropped them into the boiling stock. Ruth was going visiting, and no one was going to stop her.

After she called the minibus, she packed the cooled gefilte fish into one tupperware, poured the lukewarm sauce into another and tucked them both into her tote bag beside the Medoc. Then she reached to the cabinet above the refrigerator, took down her blowcuffs and velcroed one to each wrist. In the bedroom she opened the top drawer of her dresser and rooted through the underwear until she found two flat clips of riot gas, two inches by three. The slogan on the side read: "With Knockdown, they *go* down and *stay* down." The clips hissed as she fitted them into the cuffs. Outside, a minibus pulled into the parking lot of the Church Hill Apartments and honked.

"Damn!" There must have been one in the neighborhood; service was never this prompt. She pulled on a baggy long-sleeved shirtwaist to hide the cuffs and grabbed her tote.

As soon as Ruth opened the front door, she realized she had forgotten to put sunblock on. Too late now. The light needled her unprotected skin as she hurried down the walk. There was one other rider on the mini, a leathery man in a stiff brown suit. He perched at the edge of his seat with a aluminum briefcase between his legs. The man glanced at her

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and then went back to studying the gum spots on the floor. The carbrain asked where she was going.

"14 Hampshire Road." Ruth brushed her cash card across its port.

"The fare is \$1.35 including the senior citizen discount," said the carbrain. "Please take your seat."

She picked a spot on the bench across from the door. The air blowing out of the vents was hot, which was why all the windows were open. She brushed the hair out of her eyes as the mini rumbled around Mill Pond and onto Oyster River Road.

The mini was strewn with debris; wrappers, squashed beer boxes, dirty receipts. Someone had left a paper bag on the bench next to her. Just more garbage, she thought—until it jumped. It was a muddy Shop 'n' Save sack with the top crumpled down to form a seal. As she watched, it moved again.

She knew better than to talk to people on the minibus, but Ruth could not help herself. "Is this yours?"

The man's expression hardened to cement. He shook his head and then touched the eye clipped to the neckband of his shirt and started recording her.

"Sorry." She scooted down the bench and opened the bag. A bullfrog the size of her fist rose up on its hind legs, scabbled weakly toward her and then sank back. At first she thought it was a toy with a run down battery. Then she realized that some brain-dead kid had probably caught it down at the pond and then left it behind. Although she had not seen a frog up close in years, she thought this one looked wrong somehow. Dried out. They breathed through their skins, didn't they? She considered getting off the mini and taking it back to the water herself. But then she would be on foot in the open, an easy target. Ruth felt sorry for the poor thing, yes, but she was not risking her life for a frog. She closed the bag so she would not have to watch it suffer.

The mini stopped at an apartment on Mill Road and honked. When no one came out, it continued toward the center of town, passed another minibus going in the opposite direction, and then pulled into the crumbling lot in front of the Shop 'n' Save plaza. There were about a dozen bicycles in the racks next to the store, and four electric cars parked out front, their skinny fiberglass bodies blanching in the afternoon sun. A delivery man was unloading beer boxes from a truck onto a dolly. The mini pulled up behind the truck and shut itself off. The door opened and the clock above it started a countdown: 10:00 . . . 09:59 . . . 09:58. The man with the aluminum suitcase got off, strode down the plaza and knocked at the door of what had once been the hardware store. He watched Ruth watching him until the door opened and he went in.

The empty lot shimmered like a blacktopped desert and the heat of

the day closed around her. To escape it, she tried filling the space with ghost cars: Fords and Chryslers and Toyotas. She imagined there was no place to park, just like when they still pumped gas, before they closed the university. 06:22 . . . 06:21 . . . 06:20. But the sun was stronger than her memory. It was the sun, the goddamned sun, that was driving the world crazy. She could even hear it: the mini's metal roof clicked in its harsh light like a bomb. Who could think in heat like this?

The bag twitched again and Ruth realized she could get water from the store and pour it over the frog. She glanced at the clock. 02:13 . . . 02:12 . . . Too late now.

The carbrain honked and started the engine when the clock reached 00:30. Three kids trudged out of the store. Two were lugging sacks filled with groceries; the third was Chaz, who was empty-handed. Ruth shifted her tote bag onto her lap, got a firm grip on the handle and tried to make herself as small as possible.

"Destination, please?" said the carbrain.

"1 Simons." A fat kid clumped up the step well and saw her. "Someone on already." He brushed his card across the pay port. "Lady, where you goin', lady?"

Ruth fixed her gaze on the buttons of his blue-striped Shop 'n' Save shirt; one had come undone. She avoided eye contact so he would not see how tense she was. She said nothing.

The second one bumped into the fat kid. "Move, sweatlips!" He was wearing the uniform shirt tucked into red shorts. He had shaved legs. She did not look at his face either.

"Please take your seat," said the carbrain. "Current stops are 14 Hampshire Road and 1 Simons Lane. Destination, please?"

"Stoke Hall," said Chaz.

"Hey, Hampshire's the wrong way, lady. Get off, would ya?"

"Yeah, make yourself useful for a change." Red Shorts plopped his groceries onto the bench opposite Ruth and sprawled next to them. Ruth said nothing; she saw Chaz paying the carbrain.

"Wanna throw her off?"

Ruth clenched her fists and touched the triggers of her cuffs.

"Just leave her and stretch the ride." Chaz settled beside the others. "Less you *wanna* get back to work."

The fat kid grunted, and the logic of sloth carried the day. Ruth eased off the triggers as the mini jolted through the potholes in the lot and turned back onto Mill Road. The boys started joking about a war they had seen on the wall. Even though they seemed to have forgotten her, the side of Ruth's neck prickled as if someone were still staring. When she finally dared peek, she saw Chaz grinning slyly at her, like she expected a tip. It made Ruth angry. She wanted to slap the girl.

They looped around downtown past the post office, St. Thomas More Church and the droods' mall. The mall was actually a flea market which had accreted over the years in the parking lot off Pettee Brook Lane: salvaged lumber and old car parts and plastic sheeting over chicken wire had been cobbled together to make about thirty stalls. It was where people who lived in the dorms went. When the hawkers saw the mini coming, they swarmed into the street to slow it down. Ruth saw teens waving hand-lettered signs advertising rugs, government surplus cheese, bicycles, plumbing supplies stripped from abandoned houses, cookies, obsolete computers. A man in a tank top wearing at least twenty watches on each arm gestured frantically at her to get off the mini. They said you could also buy drugs and meat and guns at the mall, and what they did not have, they could steal to order. Ruth, of course, had never gone there herself but she had heard all about it. Everyone had. The cops raided the mall regularly, but no one dared close it down for good.

The fat kid reached across the aisle and snatched the abandoned paper sack. "This yours lady?" He jiggled it then unrolled the top. "Oh, shit." He took the frog out, holding it by the legs so that its stomach bulged at the sides. "Oh, shit, gonna kill the bastard did this."

"Sweet," said Red Shorts. "Someone left us a present."

"It's suffocatin'." The fat kid stood, swayed against the momentum of the mini and lurched toward Ruth. "They need water to breathe, same as we need air." When he thrust it at her, the frog's eyes bulged as if they might pop. "And you just sit here, doin' *nothing*." Rage twisted his face.

"I-I didn't know," said Ruth. The frog was so close that she thought he meant to shove it down her throat. "I swear, I never looked inside."

"So it's dyin'," said Red Shorts. "So let's stomp it. Come on, put it out of misery." He winked at Chaz. "Grandma here wants to see guts squirt out its mouth."

"I'll do your bones, you touch this frog." The fat kid stormed down the aisle to the door. "Stop here," he said. "Let me out."

The mini pulled over. Red Shorts called to him. "Hey sweatlips, who's gonna help me deliver groceries?"

"Fuck you." Ruth could not tell whether he was cursing Red Shorts, her or the world in general.

The door opened. The fat kid got off, cut in front of the mini and headed across town toward Mill Pond. Red Shorts turned to Chaz. "Likes frogs." He was still smirking as they drove off. "Thinks he's a Green."

She was not amused. "You leave it for him to find?"

"Maybe."

The mini had by now entered the old UNH campus. Online university had killed most residential colleges; the climate shift had triggered the



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depression which had finished the rest. But the buildings had not stood empty for long. People lost jobs, then houses; when they got hungry enough, they came looking for help. The campuses were converted into emergency refugee centers for families with dependent children. Eight years later, temporary housing had become permanent droodtowns. Nobody knew why the refugees were called droods. Some said the word came from the now-famous song, others claimed that the Droods had been a real homeless family. The mini passed several of the smaller dorms and then turned off Main Street onto Garrison Avenue. Ahead to the left was Stoke Hall. Red Shorts whispered something to Chaz, who frowned. It was getting harder and harder to ignore them; she could tell they were plotting something.

Nine stories tall, Stoke was the biggest dorm on campus. When Ruth had gone to UNH, it had housed about sixteen hundred students. She had heard that there were at least four thousand droods there now, most of them kids, almost all of them under thirty. Stoke was a "Y" shaped brick monster; two huge jaws gaped at the street. Its foundation was decorated with trash dropped from windows. The packed dirt basketball court, dug into the sloping front courtyard, was empty. The players loitered in the middle of the street, watching a wrecker hitch a tow to a stalled water truck. The mini slowed to squeeze by and Chaz slid onto the bench beside Ruth.

"Wanna get off and look?" She nodded at the dorm.

"Huh?" Red Shorts had a mouth full of celery he had stolen from one of the bags. "Talkin' to me?"

"Up there." As she leaned over to point at the upper floors, Chaz actually brushed against Ruth. "Two down, three left. Where I live."

The girl's sweaty skin caught at the fabric at Ruth's sleeve. Ruth did not like being touched. Over the years, she had gotten used to meeting people electronically, through the walls. Those few she did choose to see were the kind of people who bathed and wore clean shirts. People who took care of themselves. Chaz was so close that Ruth felt sick. It was as if the girl's smokey stink were curdling in the back of her throat. She needed to get away, but there was nowhere to go. She fought the impulse to blow Chaz a face full of Knockdown, because then she would have to gas Red Shorts, too. And what if one of them managed to call for help? She imagined the mob of basketball players stopping the mini and pulling her off. She would be lucky if all they did was beat her, the way they had beaten Matt. More likely she would be raped, killed, they were *animals*, she could *smell* them.

"C'mon," said Chaz. "You show your place. I show mine."

Ruth's voice caught in her throat like a bone. The mini cleared the

water truck and pulled up in front of the dorm. "Stoke Hall," said the carbrain. It opened the door.

"What you say, lady?" Chaz stood. "Won't hurt."

"Much." Red Shorts snickered.

"You shut up," said Chaz.

Ruth stared at the words on her T-shirt, "For a nickel I will." She felt for the triggers and shook her head.

"How come I gotta play lick ass?" Chaz squatted so that her face was level with Ruth's; she forced eye contact. "Just wanna talk." The girl feigned sincerity so well that Ruth wavered momentarily.

"Yeah," said Red Shorts, "like 'bout how you pigs ate the world."

Ruth started to shake. "Leave me alone." It was all happening too fast.

"Stoke Hall," repeated the carbrain.

"Okay, okay," Chaz rose up, disgusted. "So forget it. You don't gotta say nothing to droods. You happy, you rich, so fuck me." She turned and walked away.

Ruth had not expected Chaz to be wounded, and suddenly she was furious with the foolish girl. Her invitation was a bad joke. A woman like Ruth could not take three steps into that place before someone would hit her over the head and drag her into a room. Chaz wanted to make friends after everything that had happened? It was too late, way too late.

She was already halfway down the step well when Red Shorts leaned toward Ruth. "You old bitch pig." His face was slick with greasy sweat; these droods had no right to talk to her that way. Without thinking, she thrust her fist at him and emptied a clip of Knockdown into his eyes.

He screamed and lurched backward against the grocery sacks, which tipped off the bench and spilled. He bounced and pitched face down on the floor, thrashing in the litter of noodle soup bulbs and bright packages of candy. Ruth had never used riot gas before and she was stunned at its potency. Truth in advertising, she thought, and almost laughed out loud. Chaz came down the aisle.

"Get off." Ruth raised her other fist. "Get the hell off. *Now!*"

Chaz backed away, still gaping at the boy, whose spasms had subsided to twitching. Then she clattered down the steps and ran up the street toward the basketball players. Ruth knew at that moment she was doomed, but the carbrain closed the door and the mini pulled away from the curb, and she realized that she had gotten away with it. She *did* laugh then; the sound seemed to come to her from a great distance.

Suddenly she was shivering in the afternoon heat. She had to do something, so she grabbed Red Shorts by the shoulders and muscled him back onto a bench. She had not meant to hurt anyone. It was an accident, not her fault. She felt better as she picked up the spilled groceries, repacked them and arranged the sacks neatly beside him. He didn't look so bad,

she thought. He was napping; it would not be the first time someone had fallen asleep on the minibus. She retrieved an apple from under the bench.

She got so involved pretending that nothing was wrong that she was surprised when the mini stopped.

"14 Hampshire," said the carbrain.

Ruth regarded her victim one last time. Since she had tried her best to put things back the way they were supposed to be, she decided to forgive herself. She grabbed her tote bag, stepped off and hurried to the front door of Matt's decaying colonial. By the time the mini rumbled off, she had pushed the unpleasantness from her mind. She owed it to him to be cheerful.

Ruth had not been out to Matt's house since last fall; usually he visited her. It was worse than she remembered. He could not keep the place up on his pension. Paint had chipped off the shingles, exposing gray wood. Some of them had curled in the sun. A rain gutter was pulling away from the roof. Poor Matt couldn't afford to stay, but he couldn't afford to sell, either. No one was buying real estate in Durham. She heard him unlocking the door and made herself smile.

"*Ruth!* I thought I told you to stay home."

"Mr. Watson? Mr. Matthew Watson of 14 Hampshire Road?" She consulted an imaginary clipboard. "Are you the gentleman who ordered the surprise party?"

"I can't believe you did this." He tugged her inside and shut the door. "Do you have any idea how dangerous it is out there?"

She shrugged. "So, are you glad to see me?" She put down her tote and opened her arms to him.

"Yes, of course, but . . ." He leaned forward and gave her a stony peck on the cheek. "This is serious, Ruth."

"That's right. I seriously missed you."

"Don't make jokes. You don't understand these people. You could've been hurt." He softened then and hugged her. She stayed in his embrace longer than he wanted—she could tell—but that was all right. His arms shut the world out; his strength stopped time. Nothing had happened, nothing could happen. She had not realized how lonesome she had been. She did not even mind his cast jabbing her.

"Are you okay, Ruth?" he murmured. "Is everything all right?"

"Fine." Eventually she had to let him go. "Fine."

"It's good to see you," he said, and gave her an embarrassed smile. "Even if you are crazy. Come into the kitchen."

Matt poured the Medoc into coffee cups and they toasted their friendship. "Here's to twenty-six years." Actually, she had been friends with Greta before she knew Matt. Ruth set the tupperware on the counter.

"What should I serve the fish on?" She opened the china cabinet and frowned. Matt was such a typical bachelor: he had none of the right dishes.

"I'm glad you came over," he said. "I've been wanting to talk to you. I suppose I could tell you through the wall, but . . ."

"Tell me?" She dusted a cracked bowl with the edge of her sleeve.

He ran his finger around the rim of the cup and shrugged uncomfortably. "You know how lonely I've been since the . . . since I broke my hip. I think that's my biggest problem. I can't go out anymore, and I can't live here by myself."

For a few thrilling seconds, Ruth misunderstood. "Oh?" She thought he was going to ask her to live with him. It was something she had often fantasized about.

"Anyway, I've been talking to people at Human Services and I've decided to take in some boarders."

"Boarders?" She still did not understand. "*Droods?*"

"Refugees. I know how you feel, but they're people just like us, and the state will pay me to house them. I have more room than I need, and I can use the money."

Her hands felt numb. "I don't believe this. Really, Matt, haven't you learned anything?" She had to put the bowl down before she dropped it. "You go to the dorms to tutor, and they beat you up. They crippled you. So now you're going to bring the animals right into your own house?"

"They're not animals. I know several families who would jump at the chance to leave the dorms. Kids, Ruth. Babies."

"Look, if it's only money, let me help. Please."

"No, that's not it. You said something this morning. I'm a teacher all right, except I have no one to teach. That's why I feel so useless. I need to—"

A window shattered in the bedroom.

"What was that?" Matt bolted from his chair, knocking his wine over.

"There are many people on the street," announced the homebrain. "They are destroying property."

Ruth heard several angry *thwocks* against the side of the house and then more glass broke. She felt as if a shard had lodged in her chest. Someone outside was shouting. Wine pooled on the floor like blood.

"Call the police." Matt could not afford private security.

"The line is busy."

"Keep trying, damn it!"

He limped to the bedroom, the only room with a window wall; Ruth followed. There was a stone the size of a heart on the bed, glass scattered across the rug.

"Show," said Matt.

The wall revealed a mob of at least a hundred droods. Basketball players, hawkers from the mall, kids from Stoke. And Chaz. Ruth was squeezing her security pager so hard that her hand hurt.

"Hey, walter, send the bitch out!"

She had been so stupid. Of course Chaz had heard the carbrain repeat Matt's address.

"Boomers. *Fuckin' oldies.*"

She had never understood why they were all so eager to hate people like her and Matt. It was not fair to punish an entire generation.

"Burn 'em. Send the pigs to hell!"

The politicians were to blame, the corporations. They were the ones responsible. It was not *her* fault; she was just one person. "Go ahead, Matt," she said bitterly. "Teach them about us." Ruth pressed herself into the corner of his bedroom. "Maybe we should invite them in for a nice glass of wine?"

"What is this, Ruth?" Matt grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "What did you do?"

She shook her head. "Nothing," she said. ●

ROMEO TO JULIET, IN UTAH

They brought us here to Utah, Juliet,
And I will love you again.
I will see you in your father's house,
And it will not matter that actors
Speak our families' names—our own names—
Wrong. You will still be more lovely
Than jewels in an Ethiop's ear,
More lovely, Juliet, than that metaphor
This audience may not understand.
What hush? The Chorus on stage?
We must follow. But Juliet, see the crowd
Sitting in seats, there, waiting.

What do men and women feel
When they see us with our knives and potions,
When they watch you kiss me, hoping, not for love,
But for poison?

—M. Shayne Bell



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WHITE CHAOS

by Michael Kallenberger

Michael Kallenberger lives in Wisconsin with his wife and three daughters.

The author holds a master's degree in economics—the discipline he believes is “the closest you can get to psychohistory in the twentieth century”—and he has been fascinated by science and science fiction since childhood.

Mr. Kallenberger's first story was published in 1989 and his second, “White Chaos,” is his first to appear in *Asfm*.

art: A. C. Farley

When I'm asked what Abraham Soleirac was like, I usually just say *Yes, I knew the man*. In fact, until just before the end of his time in the public eye I knew him only in passing—my wife was a graduate student in his department. And by then he seldom seemed to regard himself as a scientist, having begun his subtle campaign to re-define himself as an artist.

(Strange how his preoccupation with Jupiter's Great Red Spot survived the transformation intact.)

Once, just outside the elevators on the third floor of Van Vleck, I waited next to one of Soleirac's coterie of protégés. In the wake of the lion-gaited mathematician's passage the student shook his head soulfully and remarked to me, "Sometimes great men are required to lie to themselves, don't you think?"

"Sure," I said, because I didn't want to know what he was getting at. Common sense faltered when I added, "But not all men who lie to themselves are great."

He laughed, too loud, the way someone does when he doesn't see the humor in what you're saying but knows you have to be joking.

The chaoticists tell us that the Great Red Spot is not the product of some propitious and non-predictable intervention. No crashing comets, no gas-spewing volcanoes—no godlike toes dipped in the stream of otherwise linear, cosmic space-time. It is a stable chaos. A result of sensitive dependency on initial conditions. Something that emerged quite inevitably from the mechanistic equations that drive Jupiter's atmosphere from one state to the next.

In his famous paper, no less breathtaking twelve years after publication, Soleirac demonstrated this with brilliant economy of thought. He also offered a startling prediction: undisturbed, the Red Spot would remain in existence for only another twenty years—the merest cosmic eyeblink—after which time it would shrink and, in less than six terrestrial months, uncurl into just another Jupiter-girdling band.

Testable? Certainly not *a priori*. Credible? As only Soleirac could be. Hubris? None, not even myself, would call it that.

Not today, and not twelve years ago when I did a pretty fair job of capturing the profound elegance of his mathematics in mere words for *Time* magazine, paving the way for Abraham Soleirac's emergence as a cultural icon.

"Of course," Soleirac would later say, in no way cognizant of the camera, his smile tucked disarmingly into one cheek, "in regard to my prediction, it may well turn out that the key word is 'undisturbed.' "

I woke up hungry, the rumble of the road pressing up through the old

Toyota's upholstery. Pulled myself upright with a sigh and a sniff. Eyes not yet open: "How about a stop? McDonald's, or something?"

"It's twelve thirty."

"Doesn't McDonald's stay open late out here in the boonies?"

"Uh-uh. Close up early, my guess."

I opened my eyes to a blackness extending from the top of my nose to forever. The body of the car seemed scarcely to exist. Outside, it was freezing; inside, not much better, heightening the feeling of surreal exposure. There was, though, a certain comfort to be drawn from the cool green glow of the dashboard lights.

Jean's face was little more than a striking edge of green cutting between two darknesses. It was enough to show how terrific she looked.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Lodi."

"Lodi?"

"Lodi."

"Like in the Creedence song?"

The green edge sprouted a tributary: her smile. After a time she said "I signed up for Soleirac's class the other day."

Another sniff. "I've been expecting it."

Too quickly: "I knew you'd be upset."

"Who's upset?—Are there any cookies left in the back?"

"Don't be like that."

Sitting erect now: "Jean, Soleirac is the biggest thing to hit mathematics since the plus sign. You'd be crazy not to take his class."

"I know what you think of him."

"I know that on his list of favorite things most students come somewhere below a prostrate exam. And that he spends more time recruiting Soleirettes than teaching chaotics."

"Don't do that. You always do that. You act like you know him—you've never even met him! You write one article about him—twelve years ago—never even interview him, and you act like you know him. I think you're the one who holds him in awe."

I unclenched my teeth and pursed my lips for a moment, staring into the murk outside my window. "We've gone over this before. My article was about his paper—not about him. And there *was* one phone interview—a short one, yes, but I'm sure it would have been longer if he'd known a hack freelancer was going to make him famous."

"So how do you know what goes on in his classes?"

". . . mutual acquaintances."

"Uh-huh. Shouldn't a good writer try to verify his facts?"

"Okay! It's unverified! Hearsay and innuendo—cheap shit going around. Happy?"

The highway twisted left, then right. The sweep of the headlights on the gravel shoulders produced a matte like choppy water viewed from an airplane.

"The man must have *something* to teach me."

"No argument. How far to Madison?"

"Fifteen, maybe twenty miles."

"He does. Soleirac is a genius. Sometimes I use that word too lightly, but in his case it's true. It's just that . . . I . . . ah, shit."

I heard her breathing, then the indecisive pistoning of a fingernail against the steering wheel. She swallowed. "I know, I know. He's gotten himself lost in a bunch of tangents. I've heard . . . I've heard a lot of that talk, too."

She was humoring me.

Here and there in the greater darkness a street light emerged, pillowed in the treetops. I thought of the cottage and the water and the laughter, and the wonder of how so much living could come with so little effort. To my faint-edged reflection I said "I wish we could've stayed up north a little while longer."

I was told once that John Fogerty really did write *Lodi* while stuck one night in Lodi, Wisconsin. I've never been able to verify that. I've never tried. But to a Creedence fan from Wisconsin it's an interesting enough bit of trivia. Still, maybe I should stop mentioning it.

Curving trajectories of purest white materialized over the platform, folding themselves into a skeletal wing. While those gathered in the spacious conference room watched, layer added itself to colorful layer, building up a holographic model of a bathyscaphe over one end of the elliptical table. Lit from below like a jovial phantom, Soleirac presided over the display.

Less than a month after Jean had earned an A — in *Advanced Phase Space Topology* we'd received the invitation to this publicity session from Bob Zastrow, chairman of the Math Department. Expecting a circus, I nonetheless accepted immediately; good articles sometimes find their inspiration in less than noble places, and besides, Jean so seldom received invitations to accompany me.

"The craft is now under construction in Ganymede orbit," Soleirac went on, observing the continued efforts of his cozy audience to get a better view. I, instead, observed him: a face youthful for forty-three, yet with well-placed crags; penetrating gaze set off by a naturally tan complexion; the taut flow of his fine mahogany-brown hair, edging down the back of his neck. "In ten months I will immerse myself in the Great Red

Spot, deprived of all external time referents but one—the sweep of the great vortex itself.”

The statement recalled Soleirac’s indirect foray into chronobiology a few years back. Universality is a key principal of chaotics; when Davidson and Bell demonstrated that Soleirac’s Red Spot equations also applied to the human heart, and used them to develop a simple preventive technique for arrhythmia, they became heroes. As did Hong for the applications he found in the treatment of schizophrenia. But heroes stand in the shadows of icons, and in each case it was Soleirac whose legend was enhanced.

One of the younger reporters, braced perhaps by a contrived boldness, said “But isn’t it true that we don’t know what impact that might have on the Red Spot itself? Couldn’t your trip even lead to its premature break up?”

“Exactly.”

Soleirac seemed not to understand the other’s quizzical nod.

“... could you elaborate on that, sir?”

“What more is there to say? Chaotics concerns itself only with apparent chaoses that in fact conceal a subtle order. The whole concept of intervention . . . ? I just don’t know.”

A shuffling silence took hold of the room for a moment.

“I want to reiterate that this expedition is in no way a scientific experiment. It is an artistic endeavor. A statement about man and time. I will be the canvas on which the Red Spot will paint its rhythms. My biological clock will forever be adjusted to its pulse.”

Crazy bastard I thought from behind my styrofoam coffee cup. By this point I was feeling manipulated, and trying to decide just how mad to get about it. Jean, I could now see, wasn’t there as my guest after all: each of the department’s grad students had been invited, on the apparent assumption that they would bring a contagious enthusiasm to the proceedings. This was true enough of the group as a whole; they seemed to have little sense of perspective where the world’s most famous chaoticist was concerned.

Except for Jean? Except, at least, for Jean.

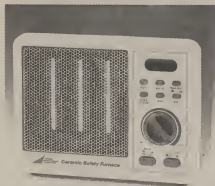
After a time Soleirac led most of the contingent out of the room for some new phase of the presentation. Jean went with the group, but I lingered. Wearing his ever-present horn-rims and red sweater, Bob Zastrow came toward me, cautiously high-stepping over the holoprojector’s cables, duct-taped to the linoleum floor.

“What do you think?” he said through his smile of prominently spaced teeth, his own cup propped along his ample waist.

“I think . . . I don’t know what to think.” As if to disguise his own considerable intelligence, Bob had a habit of nodding continuously and

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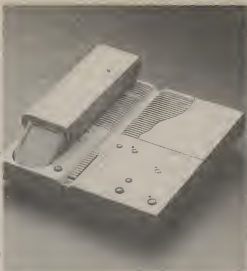
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displaying his gapped front teeth in an idiot grin whenever anyone else was speaking. Mostly you learned to ignore it. I added: "You don't suppose Abe's making one big joke at our expense, do you?"

Laughing too heartily—nobody called Abraham Soleirac *Abe*—he laid a hand along my upper arm. "He's one of a kind, isn't he?" The nod and the grin always ceased when Bob himself spoke.

I looked into the bottom of the cup, then forced myself to meet Zastrow's gaze.

"He's the John Maynard Keynes of chaotics." In response to Bob's nod-nod-nod: "After writing the *General Theory* JMK became a government bureaucrat. He became so divorced from the further development of his own work—some would call it bastardization—that economics had to start distinguishing between *Keynesians* and *followers of Keynes*."

Wishing with all my might that Bob would interrupt—or at least stop the damned *nodding*—I felt I'd trapped myself into verbalizing the rest of the analogy: "Look at Soleirac—the guy went right from breakthrough discovery to self-appointed elder statesman—what was that dinner-circuit campaign all about, 'chaotics will once and for all break down the unfortunate barriers between the sciences . . .'? All well and good. But he should've left the crusading to hacks like me! And now he's an *artist*? What am I supposed to think?"

My little speech had most certainly been drawn from my vast store of Thoughts Better Left Unspoken, and I could do nothing but swallow the last cold dregs of my coffee. But Bob—deaf to nuances, as always—revealed by his uninterrupted nod-nod-grin-grin that he'd heard only half my message, filtering out the *wasted* and dwelling on the *genius*.

We started walking in the general direction the others had taken. "Alan, I wanted to ask you something. A favor of sorts. . . ." He added—too quickly?—"But an opportunity for you, as well."

Something tweaked my stomach. Suddenly, I was starting to get mad; earlier it had become clear there'd been an ulterior motive behind Jean's invitation, and now mine was about to be revealed as equally tainted.

Weakly: "Shoot."

"The university is looking for an official biographer to write Dr. Soleirac's story. I was hoping it could be you."

"I . . . holy shit. I . . . I don't know what to say."

He looked concerned. "Is your schedule a problem?"

"No . . . no. Just . . . let me give it some thought, okay, Bob?" I watched him nod, and I watched him grin.

"Listen, Alan, when they asked me to recommend someone I didn't hesitate. Who better for the job than Alan Endridge?"

No shit, I thought. *Who better?* Who else would write just the kind of Soleirac book I would do?

From the top of the staircase, within the narrowing spaces of the vaulted ceiling, the sensation was like flying, looking down into the cozy family room where Jean sat cross-legged atop the recliner. At the point where two cones of light intersected, she was chewing on her pencil's eraser, working out some equations for a paper. On the floor books and journals fanned out around her like a poker hand.

She glanced up, over the tops of her glasses.

"Well, come on, Jean, it's not like I *invented* writer's block." I started down the stairs, dropping all my weight atop each footfall.

"Defensive, aren't we?"

"Shit."

She got up. "How about some hot cocoa?" Jean had always been great at sensing when I needed a kick in the rear and when I genuinely needed to break away from the keyboard.

I stirred an invisible cup with my finger. "With the little marshmallows on top? Sounds delightfully Norman Rockwellish. I'll take it."

She went into the darkened kitchen. Came the *beepbeep* from the microwave, then: "Are you regretting taking this job?"

"Not at all. I'm regretting being *offered* this job."

"Come again? Oh, you wish the decision had been taken out of your hands."

Paging through one of her journals: "It's obvious they only picked me because everyone associates me with Soleirac—they think I know him better than I do, as if we hang around the country club together." Jean appeared at the doorway with two cups of cocoa. I hastened to add: "Don't say it, I know, it's my own fault . . . I'm being defensive again, aren't I?"

"Actually, I was thinking that you're probably flattering yourself a little—saying that people associate you with Abraham is a little like saying you're famous in your own right. You're not, really. Not in the way you're thinking."

Jean sat with her cocoa and became involved in her math once more. I took a sip and walked to the fireplace. I started to lean one hand against it; at the touch, my eyes were drawn to the rugged fieldstone.

This house—so much of what we had—would it have been there for us if I hadn't written that article twelve years ago? I had friends, writers as good as or better than myself, who lived in two-room walkups. There was no question The Article had gotten my career going in the right direction after a frustrating half-decade.

I was surprised to hear myself say aloud, "In a certain sense Abraham Soleirac paid for this house." My fingernails, I realized, were digging into my left palm.

Jean was absorbed in her work. I looked at her; she always looked

beautiful to me. There was no doubt we were in love, and yet, one could love from across small distances. She was twenty-nine, ten years younger than myself—she hadn't even started college until I'd been out for eight years. So many middle class marriages seemed to work only because of the delusion that similar backgrounds constituted shared experiences. If our marriage was one of them, how would I ever know?

In a different tone, I went on, "Sometimes I think, maybe if I'd really given it my best shot . . . I could be a working scientist myself right now." My face flushed when I realized what I was doing.

Still scribbling: "Is this going to be the *I'm a worthless hack* speech again?"

"That's just *hack*—I don't have a *worthless* hack speech."

"Alan . . ." She looked up. "You're a great writer. You know it, I know it, Bob Zastrow sure as hell knows it. I've told you before, I admired you before I loved you."

I pressed the rim of the cup to my lips to hide my reddened cheeks; had I been that transparent? For the sake of something to say: "Writing's been terrific, don't get me wrong."

"I can remember reading it—the Soleirac article. How his genius, his wonderful quirks came through. . . ." There was a quality of growing distance in her voice which was likewise reflected in her expression: probing the deepest corners of the ceiling and beyond. "Reading it, you felt like you knew the man, like you'd shared a cup of coffee with him, as though he'd personally taken you on a ride through the fractal universes inside his computer . . ."

Something fluid and bleak passed through me as she went on. With the false clarity of depression, my mind seemed suddenly to open, to see so much more than I'd seen before, even as my fist closed in on itself once again, nails pressing painfully into flesh.

You can only drive so long before you realize you are, quite against your intentions, going somewhere. The dry cleaners, a liquor store, God forbid a mall. That ankle-pumping edginess that grips me from time to time was becoming all too familiar, and it was taking more and more miles on the odometer to dissipate it. I had crossed some line, beyond which my impetuous drives into the country were no longer therapeutic, but were in fact compounding the problem.

When the last African black rhinoceros died, I felt a pang of regret that startled me. When the North American buffalo became extinct, I actually cried. And now we were somewhat more than halfway through a two-decade vigil for Jupiter's Great Red Spot. It was like watching a cancer patient—not a relative, perhaps, but a scientist or statesman, someone admired from a distance—waste away.



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Crap, it felt as though I were waiting for a genocide. Isn't that perverse?

Frustrated, I punched the radio on, the local rock station. A couple of songs later, I was starting to feel a little better about things, the music providing some perspective the way only finger-tapping fluff with a lot of *doos* in the title can.

Then came a song that very pointedly reminded me of a task I'd perhaps deliberately forgotten. Absently scanning the cornfields, I sighed; almost immediately I turned the car around and began searching for a public phone.

The song was *Lodi*. It sounded great. I was feeling very good.

"The first thing you must realize is that there *are* no interventions. There is no such thing as noise."

My open expression, I hoped, invited him to go on. Then I thought: Why should this be a monologue? It hadn't been that long since I'd been an inquiring student. "Still, at the very least it's convenient to talk in terms of noise—the same way we talk about centrifugal force."

Soleirac tapped his pursed lips with the side of his index finger. Very diplomatically, he said, "I always refer to centrifugal *inertia*."

"You don't believe in ghosts, eh?" Though my recorder was running, I jotted something in my notebook. With a smile I held it before him. "How does this sound for a title?"

He read: "*White Chaos*. . . I like it. You know, I just may have to steal that from you. It's a very appropriate term."

Twelve years ago, I'd called Soleirac repeatedly, and got nothing more than a five minute phone interview out of him. Now? Now the man was Einstein, Salk, and Hawking all rolled into one, and I'd expected even less. When I'd knocked on his office door his features had twisted into a tentative smile of not-quite recognition. Then his grin broadened, and: "Oh, you were at the conference last week. So *you're* Alan Endridge! Why didn't you introduce yourself?"

Now, instead of a *bang-bang* question-and-answer session, we were ambling along the Lake Mendota shoreline together, feet crunching the fallen leaves, faces dappled by those that remained tree-borne—sharing a can of Diet Coke, exchanging thoughts, and for God's sake even skimming an occasional stone.

Perhaps, I thought then, scientific misnomers were not the only ghosts to be exorcised on this day.

"But Dr. Soleirac, can we really say *no* interventions? Doesn't humanity intervene in the universe thousands—maybe millions of times every day? Won't your dip in the Red Spot be an intervention?"

"Human decisions depend on the fractal equations as well."

". . . So 'humanity' and 'the universe' are a sort of statistical transfer

function—? Two on-going systems, with either one's state at any time being a function of its own previous state *and* the other's previous state?"

There was a tone of finger-wagging to his reply: "I've heard that analogy before, and there are two things wrong with it. There is nothing 'statistical' about chaotics. Statistics is the process of dividing observed quantities into *effect* and *noise*. You already know how I feel about noise."

"And the other problem?"

"There *is* only one system. Humanity, the universe, everything. One fabric. One set of equations. Look—when a mass of cold air meets a mass of warm air, it rains—but these are not in reality two distinct weather systems that happen to meet. There is no 'intervention.' Both air masses are ultimately generated by the equations governing the weather of the planet as a whole. Human consciousness is the warm air mass, if you like, and the inanimate universe, the wheeling of galaxies, the sprouting of a dandelion—" he hardly broke stride to stoop and pluck one—"these are the cold air mass. Both depend sensitively on the same initial conditions."

"The Big Bang?"

He looked up and smiled, closed-mouthed, at a cloud. "Maybe."

"Dr. Soleirac—please answer this with a straight yes or no. Are you or are you not *choosing* to enter Jupiter's Red Spot? Out of free will?"

"Oh, absolutely," he rasped. "I am choosing."

"But this will not be an intervention?"

"Now, I think you can answer that for me."

Either my own inadequacies were once again being affirmed, or Dr. Abraham Soleirac was thoroughly, disgustingly, delightfully, incurably, intermittently, ridiculously, and pointlessly crazy.

If I were the type to tabulate my life like the box score of a baseball game, if I were to someday recount all that was good and all that stunk and find that my eighty or so years lacked anything else worth keeping, I would still have the view of Jupiter from Ganymede orbit. Nothing—*nothing*—that I've experienced can compare to the magnificently colored bands brought to the forefront of my vision, seemingly touchable, yet really just an image projected from the distance onto my retinas, a tissue-thin communication from all that crushing turbulent power pulsing through the real bands, just beyond my reach.

Of course—if I were keeping score—I would also have to balance this against the fact that all our accommodations had been financed in the interest of further publicity by the *Cupbearer* (Ganymede having been the cupbearer to the gods)—the giant research station that had built Soleirac's bathyscaphe. The station was owned and operated by TransAero, a corporation whose history ranged from toxic waste dumping to impli-

cation in a Third World assassination attempt. My sarcastic references to the orbiting miniature city as the *Catamite* went emphatically unappreciated by the others.

Jean seemed to share their impatience with me. She'd received the same lustrous gold-paper invitation to this event that I had because she'd become the department's prize student, the first Ph.D. candidate in six years to have her committee chaired by Soleirac.

There was to be a formal dinner the "evening" before Soleirac's launch into the Great Red Spot. I was depilating in our suite's spacious bathroom while Jean was getting dressed.

"By the way, how's the writing coming?"

"Better. I've put together about a hundred pages of material. It's pretty raw, though."

"That's still good."

"Yeah. But I'm not sure I'm going to use any of it."

"What does that mean?"

Towelng points of depilatory off my face, I stepped into the bedroom. "Soleirac's whole life comes down to this trip into the Red Spot—it's his last big stunt, his signature event. This thing will color everything else he's done—so maybe I shouldn't have started writing yet."

"But you could write about his ideas—those won't change."

"Huh! His ideas change in mid-sentence."

There was a brief, though, for me, regret-filled pause. Her lips formed one very straight line. In a slate-calm voice she said "Alan, have you ever considered resigning this job?"

"You know I have."

"Have you? Seriously? I don't think so. But listen to yourself—do you sound like the kind of man who should be writing about the greatest scientific mind of the last hundred years?"

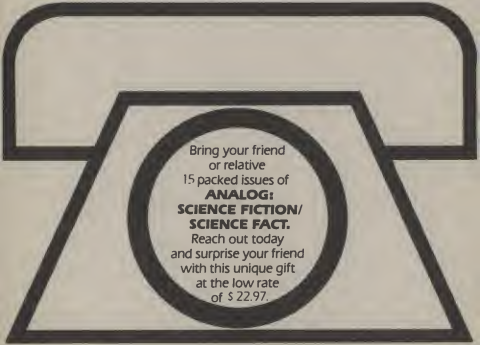
My response was confined to arching my eyebrows. I went back into the bathroom to put my toiletries away. "Okay, so why don't you explain these great ideas of Soleirac's to me? As far as I can tell, the only consistent thing the man has to say is that all human behavior is foreordained by equations as old as the universe, right down to his little expedition tomorrow. Maybe that's true, but it's hardly original—it's Laplacian determinacy! And yet he still claims to believe in free will—while rejecting statistical mechanics or any kind of quantum indeterminacy at the macroverse level, anything that might be used to reconcile his position. So you tell me what I'm missing."

When no answer came after a minute or so, I went back into the outer room. She was brushing her hair as if we hadn't been talking. I finished getting dressed.

* * *

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The speeches were the product of some PR mill, but the meal had been terrific. Now, the Alasdair Cromartie Orchestra was performing—was there no limit to TransAero's conspicuous consumption?—while much of the gathered assemblage danced. Soleirac, looking fresh and dapper in his tux, had asked Jean to join him on the floor, and they were well into their second waltz.

Almost everything in the tall chamber was either black or white. Among the purses (black) and bunched napkins (white) I sat, taking a long draw from a bottle of Pabst (brown, thank God). It was my fifth since dinner. The stars beyond the transparent canopy hadn't been twinkling when I started.

The chair next to mine pulled away from the table, and I looked up to meet Bob Zastrow's still-grinning gaze. His collar was open and his bow tie undone into two fish-silhouette flaps. "I thought you were into imported beers." He sat.

"This Pabst has come the better part of a billion miles. How much more imported can you get?" My eyes narrowed. I watched the orchestra. "Bob, did you ever just kind of look up from what you were doing, and discover that you'd been looking at yourself as if . . . I don't know, as if you were from Alpha Centauri or something, and ask yourself *why?* Just plain old *why?*"

"I take it you mean the *Big Why* . . . ?"

"The *Big Y?*"

"You know . . ." he grinned.

"No, no—not *Yale*."

"No, I know, not the *Big Y* . . . I said the *Big Why*."

I turned to look at him—nod, nod. Grin, grin. "Bob, you have a knack for ruining the deepest, most philosophical, most goddamned *humorless* moods I get myself into, don't you?"

"You're welcome."

I caught the waiter's eye and displayed my almost empty bottle, then drained the filmy remnant.

Bob was revealing all his teeth. "Um . . . so did you want to talk about something?" I realized he was as cuddly-drunk as myself.

"Nah."

"You shouldn't get so down on yourself, Alan."

"Who said I was . . ." The waiter came by with the Pabst. I nodded my thanks, silent until he walked off. "Who said I was down on myself?"

"At one time or another we've all felt that we've hitched a ride on the wrong wagon."

"What?"

"Soleirac—the hype, the talking head. That's how you see him, isn't it?"

Cautiously: "I guess . . ."

"Personally, I don't think there's anything wrong with that. Leaders who depend almost entirely on their charisma—it's almost a cliché. But . . . good things do come of it. Important things. Like this time. Chaotics, all science—it's riding a twelve-year tidal wave. Attracting grant money, bright students."

"Bob, wait, you can't . . . I know you don't believe . . . what about the Great Red Spot equations, Davidson and Bell, Hong's work on schizophrenia . . ." His only reply was to nod rapidly as I spoke.

I took a swallow of beer. "This isn't like you, Bob, to be so . . . so . . ."

"To act as though I know my ass from a hole in the ground?"

"Well . . . yes."

"Then listen to me while you've got me this way. Alan—start liking yourself again, wouldja? Sometimes we take a good hard look at our icons and all we see are reflections of ourselves, and vice versa. So we wind up not knowing how to feel—we resent their successes, yet we despise them for their failures. If you can't deal with that ambivalence, well . . . you sure as hell can't unwrite The Article. But there's still time to learn to see yourself as just yourself."

"Oh, for Christ's sake." My brow creasing against my will, I watched his eyes through his thick glasses. Nod, grin. "You're way off base, Bob—that has nothing to do with the Big Why. The Big Why is why haven't the Cubs won the Series in . . . let's see, has it been an even hundred years yet?"

He winked at me with a fatuously wicked half-grin. "I understand." Slapping his palms down atop his thighs, he rose from the chair and wandered off again.

With my right eye focused down the length of the beer bottle's neck, I told myself that I was taking Bob's presumptuousness so calmly only because I'd been startled to hear him talk about this at all—Bob Zastrow simply did *not* know of neuroses and self-doubts and ambiguous motivations; he allowed no understanding of human behavior at all.

Given that, Revealed Truth couldn't have been more unsettling than his glib dime store psychoanalysis.

The following day Abraham Soleirac was dispatched in his bathyscaphe into the Great Red Spot, where he would spend 180 terrestrial days.

It was a quiet, quirky whirlwind of a half year. Wherever Jean or I went, from a tennis court to the aisles of a grocery store, people would approach us and ask about Abraham Soleirac: "How is Dr. Soleirac doing?" "Hey, only eighty more days." "Let him know our thoughts are with him." At first I'd been amused by it all, and maybe even a little embarrassed.

But I began to realize that there was something *heartfelt* about these responses. It was touching, the simple vicarious courage these people found in Soleirac's mission, all the more so for their apparent ignorance of its nature. It was almost as though he were holding his breath under all that slushy Jovian hydrogen, and the world was unconsciously holding its breath along with him. There was a bond in this waiting together, a sense of marching in unison, a warmth—not the warmth of porch swings or nickel Cokes, but of humankind challenging a vortex hundreds of millions of miles distant, big enough to swallow two earths comfortably.

The writing was not going particularly well, but I really didn't mind—after all, only Soleirac's return would provide the template to realign my simple chronology and reveal just which of its events would take on the resonance of climax. But I had immersed myself in the events and nuances of his life, and I had mastered the technique of molding this clay—it was just a matter of visualizing the core around which it would be layered. I rather enjoyed the sense of going about my life, waiting with the rest of the world.

And yet my life was not entirely my own. Those who'd been gathered on the *Cupbearer* were of one face to the public, celebrated, perhaps, but not celebrities. Still, as a group we'd developed a certain camaraderie with Soleirac's larger audience. I felt it. It was there. It was like a background hum that had been assimilated into my days and nights, an endorphin high that I could draw on whenever I wanted to. Jean and I now seemed to avoid those strained silences that had occasionally befallen us, and I didn't even let it bother me that Soleirac was indirectly responsible for the easing of some of our tensions.

When the invitation came to return to the *Cupbearer*, I realized I wasn't sure if I wanted the background hum to fade. But it was time to learn of climaxes and anticlimaxes. The 180 days were just about up.

The docking bay was a vast open space, the kind you gauge in football fields or aircraft carriers or other such mythical units of measurement. We stood behind a transparent wall overlooking an anvil-like platform that jutted out from the interior bulkhead. At various points in the huge block of vacuum space-suited figures clung against the station's "gravity"—centrifugal inertia. The view was split in two by a cable, erratically strummed by the mass of Soleirac's orbiting bathyscaphe—as yet well beyond the station's geography—its attitude rockets struggling to neutralize the coriolis effect as it was reeled in.

When the craft's nose surfaced in the inky pool of stars at the base of the metallic canyon—barely visible if we pressed our faces to the glass—I

could feel my heart beating against my ribs. The six-month wait had not dulled the anticipation.

But the wait was far from over; the scaphe's flirtation with our field of view only signaled the loitering riggers to action. They spread out along the cable like weeds on a fishing line, threading guy wires all over the apparatus. The foreman tightbeamed his orders to the appropriate worker with relentless *bang-bang* spurts of his trigger finger, deftly assembling a network of cables. Ultimately they lifted Soleirac's scaphe onto the platform and closed the great bay doors with a rumble we could sense only through the soles of our shoes.

Then the craft's hatch was connected to the bulkhead with a flexible, accordion-pleated tube not quite as wide as a man was tall. For one of the few times that day, my gaze lingered on something on this side of the wall—the door to the airlock, a round slab as imposing as the bank vaults in old movies. With the circumferences on both ends sealed, air started chug-chugging into the tube. The withered, wrinkled portions filled out into a clean geometry, and the chugging stopped.

We gathered around the door.

Henry Exeter, the *Cupbearer's* black-haired young chief operating officer, unsealed the lock and passed through. Minutes later he emerged again, alone, and pointed to Bob. "Dr. Zastrow, I think you'd better come with me. The rest of you stay here."

No one said a word—damn few dared so much as exchange glances—as the two men bent their heads to enter the tunnel. But it was not so very much later that the tube started jouncing with the return passage of several sets of feet. Long muttering echoes preceded them through the opening.

Exeter, then Soleirac, then Zastrow stepped into the observation room, with the first and last quickly assembling themselves into a shoulder-to-shoulder protective cordon around the famous chaoticist. He looked haggard and a little shaken, but not unexpectedly so, his hair pressed back as if it had been combed one too many times with sweaty fingers. Between Exeter's long stateliness and Zastrow's bulk, Soleirac seemed small. He repeatedly winced and relaxed his eyes, as if forcibly adjusting them to the light, which was in fact no brighter than that he'd emerged from. He was not regarding any one of us so much as the far bulkhead, a blank gray expanse.

Jean took a halting step forward. "Abraham . . . ?"

In a voice fluid and clear, as if it had not gone unused during his sojourn: "M-Mother warned me about leaving my windows open . . ."

Exeter looked as though he were mulling whether or not to take more active control of the situation. He made an unobtrusive *not just yet* gesture toward the station's doctor, who held back. Jean approached her

mentor, and Exeter, sucking his lower lip, took a discreet sidelong half-step.

"Abraham, are you all right? How was it? How much time did you think had elapsed?"

"Mother is going to be so very angry . . . I should have been more modest. I took off my clothes in front of the window. The shades were up . . . Mrs. Holston next door was watching . . ."

One of the grad students made a declaration so hysterical and so baseless that I immediately knew it would become a tabloid truth: "He's schizophrenic! The equations—the Red Spot made him schizophrenic!"

And another: "Check his heart—arrhythmia, the same equations!"

Exeter recognized this nonsense as a good excuse to get Soleirac out of there, and he motioned to the doctor, who quickly entered the collapsing circle of onlookers and, with a hand pressed lightly between Soleirac's stooped shoulders, hustled the raving chaoticist out of the room.

The steam from my coffee drifted grayly through the cone of light from my desk lamp and, returning to the darkness, turned ashen white. The mug was still full. It wasn't caffeine that was propelling my fingers over the keyboard.

Abraham Soleirac's life—chance and circumstance, breakthroughs and ultimate failures, flesh and blood—was being recorded as autobiography. *White Chaos* was finally becoming a living, breathing document. In the darkness behind me Jean slept, a troubled sleep, I'm sure, as her wakefulness had been. But things were falling into place for me in a way I couldn't explain, and there was no stopping now.

Perhaps it was the realization that, if I were to walk away from this project now, my identification with the chaoticist would truly become inescapable—it would always be said that Alan Endridge had been too consumed with grief to complete the work, that he'd been unable to go on after the tragedy of the Great Red Spot. The only tragedy, which I would of course now make clear to all, was that absolutely *nothing* Soleirac had done after age thirty-one mattered in the least; he'd proffered only the inarticulate mutterings of a mind in the very early stages of breakdown. Yet my purpose was not to declare the emperor's new clothes a fraud. *White Chaos* would be laced with celebration and sorrow, compassion and hope.

A block letter M began flashing in the upper left hand corner of my screen. I was more curious than annoyed, so I keyed to accept that communication.

ALAN IS THAT YOU? WHAT ARE YOU DOING UP AT THIS HOUR? BOB

Now more annoyed, I simply punched in BUSY.

AS LONG AS YOU'RE UP YOU SHOULD COME TO THE OBSERVATORY.

WHY?

COME SEE. THIS AFFECTS YOU.

Massaging my jaw with two fingers, I pushed away from the desk. I considered donning my robe over the gym shorts I usually wore to bed, then decided I'd best pull on pants and a shirt. Minutes later I was knocking on the door of the observatory, wondering why I was letting Bob jerk me around this way. Even now sentences were practically composing themselves in my head, and I wanted to get back to the keyboard.

Zastrow, Exeter, and a couple of the staff astronomers were gathered before a holovision monitor, nestled within a long technical-looking console, displaying Jupiter. The planet's orangey glow was the room's dominant lighting—the scene reminded me of something from an old submarine movie. Bob glanced only momentarily at me before returning his gaze to the tank.

"What is it?" I asked with practiced annoyance.

"Take a look," Bob said.

I looked at the scene in earnest, scanning for something out of the ordinary. I saw nothing. "Your color needs adjusting," I said, a little too smugly.

"Color's perfect. It's matched to visual."

Irritated: "The Red Spot is amber!"

Eye-for-eye in smugness: "You got it."

My eyebrows shot up as I returned my gaze to the tank. The Great Amber Spot? I stammered: "Soleirac—what did he—was this what he meant when he said his mission was an artistic endeavor? He *died* the Red Spot? How could . . . ?"

One of the astronomers said, "He couldn't. Remember—that thing's as wide as two Earths. Not to mention the bands that feed it. Do you have any idea how much dye that would take?"

"Then . . . what?"

"In a matter of hours the Red Spot itself has broken up. At the same time it was unwrapping itself, a side stream flowed into the area it vacated, simultaneously forming what you see right now."

"But . . . but the Red Spot was there for . . . millennia! How could it be replaced overnight? That's not possible!"

Zastrow said "Remember the Butterfly Effect, Alan?"

The Butterfly Effect—the fundamental metaphor of chaotics. Lorenz's equations, way back in the 1960s, had demonstrated that weather all over the earth could be affected by the change in air conditions as seemingly trivial as the flapping of a butterfly's wings. That's why they'd named this science chaotics in the first place.

"Soleirac's bathyscaphe . . . ?"

"We think so."

"This was intentional, then? An unpublished application of the equations . . . ?"

"You tell us. You know him better than any of us."

I laughed. I laughed because I now saw it was true. I knew the man better than any of them did. And I think—somewhere in my gut, if not in my head—I think I understood.

I winced as the bedspring creaked.

"Alan . . . ?"

"Sshh—I'm sorry, honey, go back to sleep." I lay, and pulled the blanket over me.

She rolled over to face me, still mimicking sleep. "I thought you were writing."

"I was." The rhythm of her breathing seemed deliberate. I pressed up close to her, the top of her head against my throat, and put my arm around her. I said, "Are you worried about Dr. . . . about Abraham?"

"There's nothing else we can do for him. He'll have the best care." Still the rhythmic breathing. "I don't know what to think about . . . everything. About what happened to him."

"He was giving nature—wonder—back to us."

"What?"

"The Red Spot."

She arched her neck to view me through bleary eyes. "Is it me, or aren't you making any sense?"

Through a smile: "Why would I start making sense this late in life?" Kissing the bridge of her nose, I realized we'd begun a subtle rocking motion, as if subconsciously comforting one another. "All his double-talk about free will and human behavior and deterministic equations—that's why he made this trip. He couldn't save the Red Spot—so he gave something else back to us. Not an intervention—but not white noise. None of the above . . ."

"I still don't know what you're talking about." Our rhythmic motion continued; it seemed as if the station were a hollow pendulum rocking around us while we moved counter, like ball bearings sliding back toward the bottom.

"He couldn't stand to watch the Red Spot die. He had to save it—but what good would some artificial Red Spot be? A monument to Abraham Soleirac? He didn't want that. Where was the wonder? It had to be a product of the equations. Nature—in all its glorious ambiguity."

She said nothing, just nestled against me, and in some sense I felt she understood—she knew about the Great Amber Spot without my having told her. But of course that was nonsense. So I told her.

Within the *Cupbearer* we seemed encased against the cold ambiguities.

But out there . . . free will, white noise, driven by the equations all. Equations the product of will, of intervention. As far back as Bohr cosmologists have been intimating that there's no way to separate the observer from the observed. That was it, then—there was no distinguishing will from equation.

While we lay in that bed, planets turned in their orbits, atoms decayed, and babies were born. Output of the same chaotic equations. In some abstract phase space—call it, for convenience, the mind of God, or perhaps the collectively programmed consciousness—our gentle rocking motion was a fractal kink in a trajectory of infinite self-similarity—the universal strange attractor. The next kink over might represent a second grader struggling with his math, a developer devouring another chunk of the Amazon rain forest, or a pulsar emerging from the death throes of a giant star.

And it was all simultaneously will and equation. Humankind stands forever at the nexus of a cosmic house of mirrors, facing two infinitely self-similar ranks of *will* and *equation*, trying to find the reality among the reflected images, but there is no reality, there is only the glorious ambiguity. We may someday peel back the fabric of the universe only to find ourselves staring at the backs of our own heads.

Jean laughed, as if in delight, as I rubbed my hand over her shoulder. "Glorious ambiguity? You do tend to fall in love with a phrase. Are you making this up?"

"Am I making what up?"

"Everything."

"Yes. I guess I am. We all are."

Still rocking with the chaotic rhythms in each other's arms: "You're babbling. I'm not even sure if you've got an opinion buried in all that gibberish or not."

"About Soleirac's trek? Oh yes, I have an opinion. I think. . . ." With perhaps a note of unintended caution, I said "I think it was a work of art." ●

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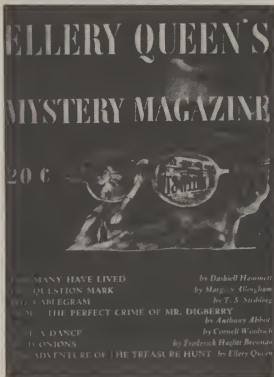
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ONE-SHOT

by Lawrence
Watt-Evans



* Lawrence Watt-Evans' last short story for *IASfm*, "Windwagon Smith and the Martians" (April 1989), won our Fourth Annual Readers' Award.

Mr. Watt-Evans's first horror novel, *The Nightmare People*, is available from NAL/Onyx. His forthcoming works include a new Ethshar novel, *The Blood of the Dragon* (Del Rey), and an anthology entitled *Newer York* (NAL/Roc).

art: Pat Morrissey

The FBI man turned the tiny calculator over in his hands, still marveling, as the prisoner said, "It took me this long to get up my nerve—sixteen months, is it? I'd meant to confess right away, but I couldn't, I was scared. But it's been eating at me. I had to show someone. I had to tell someone the truth."

The agent put the calculator down on the old green blotter, next to the yellowed newspaper clipping, and looked up. "All right," he said, "Maybe you did come here from some alternate future. Maybe it's all true, crazy as it sounds. But it's still murder."

"I know," the prisoner said miserably, "But I *had* to. I couldn't let President Kennedy die."

The FBI man nodded. He glanced at the calculator, and tapped the clipping with a finger. "Yeah," he said, "I can see that. The lab says this paper and ink are really, genuinely thirty or forty years old, not just artificially aged, but the date's just last year—so if this *is* a hoax, you've been setting it up for a long, long time." He read the headline.

JFK SHOT.

He shook his head.

"Damn," he said, "I don't know if we should give you the chair or a medal. I mean, so far, it's been hushed up, everyone's bought the suicide story, but sooner or later it's bound to leak, you know?"

The prisoner nodded miserably.

The FBI man stared at the clipping. "President Kennedy shot," he said. "And you prevented it. Still, did you have to *kill*? Couldn't you have stopped it any other way?"

The prisoner shrugged. "I had to be *sure*," he said. "When you're dealing with someone that unbalanced, stopping one attempt might not be enough."

The agent shut his eyes and rubbed at his forehead, trying to stall off another headache.

"Excuse me . . ." the prisoner said.

The agent opened his eyes. "What?"

"I was just wondering . . . has anyone talked to President Kennedy about it?"

The agent shook his head. "No. I've passed the word up to headquarters, and they're considering it. Maybe when the president gets back from Dallas next week." He grimaced. "He'll probably want *you* shot—they say he had a real thing for Marilyn." ●



WHERE OR WHEN

by Steven Utley

Steven Utley returns to our pages
with a witty and compassionate tale
about one of the most
disastrous vacations of all time ...

art: Roger Raupp



Suddenly, we were *going*. Just as suddenly, but completely unexpectedly, I came tumbling through dense, tangled underbrush, crashed heavily into an arrester net of creepers, and half-lay, half-hung there, panting, aching, astonished. Above me were draperies of vines and the interlaced branches of scrub pines; patches of blue sky were visible through the interstices. All about me were gloom and silence. Then, from afar, came a long, rippling burst of noise, pow pop-pop-pop pow.

Before the sounds could fade completely, there was a second burst, more ragged than the first but also more sustained, pop-pop-pow, and a pause, and then pop-pop-pop, pause, pow-pow-pop. It must have gone on like that for half a minute or more, during which time an unpleasant suspicion began to form in my mind. As the racket subsided, I cupped my hands around my mouth and sang out hopefully, "John!"

There was no answer, only another long series of rippling pops.

After some minutes' thrashing about, I managed to find footing and get up and out of the creepers. I found myself on a slope, surrounded by stunted pines and up to my waist in underbrush. My stick and beaver hat were gone, and my Dundreary whiskers were full of twigs, burrs, and bits of leaves. My clothes were torn and dirty. The day was very warm, and I was already slimy with sweat; my hand came away streaked with a film of mud when I wiped my forehead. Self-pity welled up in me. I would never be allowed into the exposition in my present disheveled state.

I called out John's name again. This time someone called back, "Help!," and before I could decide from which direction the cry had come, there were other sounds, of flailing limbs, cracking rotten wood, shredding fabric, and eloquent profanity, and a woman burst headfirst halfway through a mass of foliage some yards from where I stood. I didn't recognize her immediately, though I had been introduced to her not an hour before, subjective time. She, too, had been in John's party and should have been in it still. Now she had lost her cap and her parasol, and her coiffure, which had been so carefully done up for this jaunt, had been undone by branches, thorns, and simple gravity. She had a long, bloody scratch along the curve of one fine cheekbone and looked mad enough to bite into a live badger.

"Don't just *stand* there!" she snapped. "I'm *caught*! I'm upside-down in this goddamn *stupid* bush!"

I made for her, but it was hard going. The legs of my trousers ended in loops that passed under the shanks of my black Wellington boots; a loop would catch on one stick of wood or another every time I took a step. Finally, I had to stop, sit, and get out my pen-knife. It was a replica of an exquisite nineteenth-century instrument and razor-sharp. I cut the loops off and disgustedly flung them away into the underbrush.

The woman grabbed me as soon as I had come within grabbing distance. I let her cling to me for a few seconds while I got my breath back. Then I tried to pull her out of the bush. It was no use.

I said, "Can't you just sort of back out of there?"

"Not with these clothes on. I can't *move*. This is the height of mid-nineteenth-century fashion I've got on, and it's like wearing a circus tent. I can't breathe, either. They made me wear some goddamn piece of armor-plated underwear."

"They always have been sticklers for accuracy of period detail."

"Who in eighteen fifty-one's gonna get to see what I wear under my dress?"

"Well, you just never know, do you?" and I gave her a wryly apologetic grin that absolutely failed to endear me to her, took out my trusty pen-knife again, and got around behind her. Viewed from that side, she rather resembled an enormous blossom. Her legs, sheathed in long, lace-trimmed drawers, were the stamens, and her numerous and varied petticoats, the petals.

I said, "Good God, how many petticoats are you wearing?"

"Eighty or ninety."

"There's enough silk here for a parachute battalion."

"It's not silk, it's muslin."

"Whatever."

"Just cut, cut! Jesus Christ!"

I began to saw at the material. She began to curse, first somebody named George, whose idea it evidently had been, and then John, whose fault it all was. She stopped in mid-slander as the rippling pops were repeated.

"What's that noise?" she said.

"Well, I don't want to alarm you, but—"

"Alarm me?" She glared around at me as best she could. "Gosh, you mean to say something's *wrong* with this picture? You mean to tell me this *isn't* the goddamn Crystal Palace? Jesus! I never would've guessed!"

She was within her rights to be upset, upended in a small tree as she was, and probably lost in time and space as well. Still, her sarcasm stung. I tried not to let her irritation infect me and kept ripping at her layers of petticoats. "I think we've landed near a battle or something," I told her. "I think that sound like popcorn popping is guns being fired. A lot of guns."

"Oh, that's great, that's just great. Look, while you're trying to cop a feel back there, reach up and cut through this corset."

"You're going to have to undo some buttons or something at your end first, so I can get up under your jacket and blouse."

We fumbled and fussed for several minutes more. At last she was able

to slither forward out of both the bush and most of her clothes. She did still have on her jacket and blouse, her long drawers, stockings, and boots, and I had made a point of leaving some fabric below the waist, so that she now wore a droopy, uneven, knee-length skirt adorned with a few bedraggled ribbons and bows. I watched as she reached into what remained of her clothing and began to tug at something. She caught me watching and paused to look me straight in the eye.

"A gentleman averts his gaze when a lady removes her corset."

"A thousand pardons."

I averted my gaze, and she fell to grunting and gasping. After a time, during which I heard two more or less distinct volleys of pops from not so far off as before, there came a final, triumphant exhalation from behind me. A moment later, trailing imprecations and strings or straps or possibly poison-barbed tendrils, an odd rectangular object sailed semi-rigidly over my head and lodged itself in the branches of a scrub pine.

"Okay to look now," she said crisply, so I looked. Stood right-side-up and free of the undergarment from Hell, she was a rather attractive brunette in her early or middle thirties. I found that I had to admire the way she raked some errant strands of hair out of her face, brushed dirt and leaves from one sleeve of her jacket, adjusted a soiled glove just so, with the air of one who need do no more to restore herself to presentability. She stepped toward me and offered her hand. Not everyone can look terribly, terribly formal in not much more than clothing remnants and a hairdo that has exploded, so I was duly impressed.

"We were introduced before," she said, "but I'm no good at remembering people's names. I'm Elizabeth Hazel."

"Lewis Alisdair. Charmed." I took her hand and made a little bow over it. I was stuck in character. Amusement flickered at the corners of her mouth, and she made a slight curtsying motion. We had signed on with John to go play-act, and, by God, with or without John, here we were, play-acting.

"Okay," she said, dropping my hand and her own show of formality as though both suddenly just bored the daylights out of her, "now let's go find John so I can kill him for dumping me into a damn bush. No, wait, first I'll sue him for every penny he's got. The Institute, too. *Then* I'll kill him."

"I don't think you can sue him, or the Institute, either. That waiver you signed—"

"Oh hell, that's right. Well, I'll just have to settle for killing him, then."

"These things have been known to happen. It may not have been John's fault."

"Who else's fault might it be? He *is* our guide. He *is* supposed to know what he's doing. He *was* supposed to deliver us safe and sound to London

in eighteen fifty-one." Fists on hips, she glared around unhappily at the woods. "I don't know where the hell we are, but I sure don't expect to run into Queen Vicky and Albert around here. We've obviously missed the exposition by God knows how many years or miles—or both, most likely. So kindly stop defending that asshole, okay?" Now she was glaring unhappily at me. "What are you, anyway, the Institute's liability-law boy, public relations, what?"

"I'm a sightseer, too. Bought a ticket, same as you," and I gave her what was meant to be a rueful, we're-in-this-together kind of look, to which she responded with all the warmth of a frozen dinner. Falteringly, I slogged on. "It's not that I'm—I'm not defending John, but I have known him a long time, and I've traveled with him before, and I'm just saying—"

"He is an asshole, you know. He revels in it."

"The point is—"

"He was coming on to the women in the group before we left." She feigned a shudder. "Made my skin crawl, he's such a creep. I think being a creep must go with the job or something. Like whatever it is that makes someone able to time-travel also makes him a creep. Like there aren't already enough goddamn asshole creeps who *can't* travel through time."

I waited before speaking to make sure that she had exhausted the subject of creeps for the time being. "The point is," I said, "John will find us. Wherever we go in time or space, outside our proper matrix, we're anomalies. We leave a trail John can't miss in a hundred years."

That was time-travel humor, but old time-travel humor. She didn't even bother to smile politely. "I *know* we're not marooned here forever or anything. At least we better not be. But what do we do until that jerk gets here?"

"We're supposed to stay put when something like this happens, but that may not be such a good idea under the circumstances. The battle sounds like it's coming our way."

After a moment, she said, "Any idea where we are or who's making all the fuss?"

"Judging from the trees, somewhere in the northern temperate latitudes."

"That narrows it down."

"Judging from the gunfire—" I shrugged helplessly. "My specialty is nineteenth-century English literature."

She looked at me in frank dismay. "How fascinatingly interesting," she said, in the voice women usually reserve for dealing with lecherous bores. "I don't suppose you also happen to know any woodcraft, do you? As in how to figure out which way we should go? Or how to start a fire and find food and water, just in case we do get stuck here? No? Great. I need Tarzan, Daniel Boone. I get a prissy English lit specialist."

Heat was creeping up my neck and face, and in the back of my mind was a bubbling sound like vinegar and baking soda stirred together. Sometimes, the natural product of chemistry between a man and a woman is a stink bomb. I said, "I cannot imagine how you expected to pass yourself off as a well-bred Englishwoman of the nineteenth or any other century."

"Now what's that supposed to mean?"

"How in the world did you ever get past screening? Good God, your accent's bad enough—what *is* that, Dallas? Texarkana? But. Worse by far. Proper nineteenth-century ladies do not use the s-word in conversation, or the f-word, or any other a-to-z word, for that matter. Proper nineteenth-century ladies probably don't even *think* those words."

I might as well have insulted her pet cat. She gave me the most beligerent look I had seen on a human face since my first marriage. "You got a problem with the way I talk?"

"I've got a problem with you, period. And another thing I've got is a strong aversion to getting mobbed. When we do get where we're going, don't speak to anyone until I'm clear of you. You'll probably start a riot by saying fuck in front of the queen."

"Don't think I can play the part, huh?" She sat up straight all of a sudden, folded her hands in her lap, drew a breath, fixed me with cold old Pleistocene ice in her eye. She said, perfectly calmly, perfectly veddy-English-thenk-yew-snootily, "I can do anything to which I put my mind, Mister Alisdair, up to and beyond impersonating a well-bred Englishwoman." By comparison, her earlier show of formality amounted to a hug and a howdy-do from a loose and crazy woman.

"I have degrees in history and linguistics," she went on, "and I have professional-acting experience. I speak four languages and numerous dialects." She paused, cleared her throat softly, and another amazing change came over her. Her new voice dripped Canarsie. "On my second excursion, I met Anne of Austria." Enn ah Awstreeuh. "She was Louis the Thirteenth of France's girl friend." Gel frin. "I hid my recording equipment in my wig." She had come around again to East Texas for that. "Get the picture, asshole?"

"Well, shut my mouth," and I did.

Probably we could have sat there, not speaking, not looking at each other, until John found us or Hell froze over, whichever occurred first, but another volley of gunfire made us peer nervously into the surrounding woods. It was impossible to see more than twenty yards in any direction, but it seemed to me that the popping noises were coming from directly up the slope. I could hear people yelling now, too, and had a horrible thought. What if they were Apache Indians or Nazis or other barbarians who were notorious for cruelty?

Elizabeth was looking around wonderingly. "Who'd be dumb enough," she said, "to bring an army into this place?" Obviously, no one as smart as she. "There're probably snakes in these woods. There're probably ticks," and I saw her shudder again. This time, the shudder seemed genuine. "Yuck. Ticks."

"Let's get out of here." I pointed downhill. "I think we should go that way."

"I think so, too. And fast."

We turned and lumbered down the slope. The growth fought us every step of the way. As though the underbrush were not bad enough, the land here was as choppy as the surface of a gale-swept sea: we had traveled very little distance at all before we found ourselves slogging uphill; then the ground dipped again, more sharply this time. And as though thicket and broken terrain were not a bad enough combination, neither of us was outfitted for a trek through the wild woods. We hadn't gone ten yards before her stockings were only a memory. Her fashionable boots looked as though they were already beginning to disintegrate. Mine were just starting to pinch my feet.

Yet we pushed on, until we came to a sluggish creek that had cut a shallow, steep-sided ravine through the tangle. There we practically collapsed. We were dripping perspiration and covered with burrs and approximately three hundred fresh scratches apiece. We had managed to put some distance between the fighting and ourselves, but not much, and certainly not enough. The shooting still sounded close. I couldn't be sure, because I now discovered that my watch had been torn from its chain, but my guess was that it had taken us the better part of an hour to cover, at most, a quarter of a mile of ground.

Elizabeth knelt in the mud beside the creek, dipped in her handkerchief, oohed gratefully as she dabbed it against her face. "I'm so thirsty," she said.

"Me, too, but not enough to drink this stuff." I did scoop up some water in my hand and splash it on my face. "Inoculations or no."

"Where's your spirit of adventure?"

"Left it on the expressway in rush-hour traffic this morning. I almost missed getting to the jump-off on time."

"I bet now you wish you had." She re-wetted her handkerchief and swabbed her face some more. "I wish I had. This is the worst blind date I've ever had."

We were actually grinning at each other. Exhaustion had taken a little of the starch out of both of us.

The shooting sounded very close now.

I said, "We'd better keep moving," she muttered something heartfelt, and we picked ourselves up and trudged on.

The ravine widened and deepened as we moved downstream, and as the banks drew away from us on both sides, scrub pines and saplings closed in densely. Soon, neither bank was visible. The creek itself broadened and deepened and meandered. The ground became swampy underfoot. We were soon exhausted again and had to take another rest. Maddeningly, the sounds of gunfire seemed no farther behind us than ever.

"John'll never find us in this place," Elizabeth said.

"He certainly does have his work cut out." I reached over and started to give her a reassuring pat on the arm, but she recoiled.

"Look," she said, "just don't mess with me, okay?"

Mercurial bitch, I thought.

Not looking at each other, we listened to another volley or two.

I heard her sigh. "Guess we'd better go."

Still not looking at her, I started to get to my feet and gripped the bole of a dead pine to steady myself. Just about eight inches above the spot where I had placed my hand, a patch of bark as big around as a saucer suddenly exploded with a zing, spraying me with splinters and grit. My hand dropped to my side, very quickly, seemingly of its own volition, for it took me another couple of seconds to decide to drop to the ground. I looked around frantically but could see only trees and creepers and, hanging among the pines, a small puff of bluish smoke. Elizabeth was still on her feet. She looked down at me exasperatedly, as though I were a total stranger who had embarrassed her by willfully falling at her feet in public and having a fit.

"Elizabeth," I said.

"What's the matter with—"

I grabbed her and pulled her down and rolled halfway on top of her, and there was a moment as short as a heartbeat during which she was too surprised to react and the woods were silent except for a subdued, almost featureless sort of background beeswarm murmur, and then, abruptly, the murmur resolved itself into the sounds of men and masses of men thrashing and crashing about in the underbrush, and yells of excitement, and an eruption of reports, quite close this time, and quite emphatic, and now much less like the sound of popcorn popping than like that of pebbles or dried peas being shaken in a large gourd, and there were more zinging explosions among the trees. Some of the yelling turned anguished. The sounds were all around us now; we weren't near a battle, we were in it. I risked a look but there was nothing to see except a thick haze of gunsmoke drifting among the trees. I pulled my head back in and lay on my belly beside Elizabeth in the mud.

The woods grew gloomier as gunsmoke collected under the branches. There was a bitter smoky stench in the air that stung our eyes and

burned our throats, and now, between blasts of gunfire, we could hear men crying out in pain and terror. From just downstream, off to our left, came a blurry bawled command, the rustle and crash of heavy movement through underbrush, then splashing noises. I glimpsed shadowy forms pushing through knee-deep water at the nearest bend of the creek. From upstream came another thunderous rattle of gunfire. Orange flames flickered among the trees, and there were more cries, more sounds of movement.

There were other sounds, too, a rising roar of wind among the treetops, a crackling, a hissing. I couldn't imagine what they signified. Then came a different sort of smoke smell, and at almost the same moment Elizabeth put her mouth close to my ear and yelled, "The woods are on fire! We've got to get out of here!"

As though on cue, flame curled through a tripod of dead pines not twenty feet from where we lay. Elizabeth made to get up. I grabbed her arm roughly.

"You want to get yourself shot?"

She jerked away. "I sure as hell don't want to burn to death or suffocate!"

"Keep down, or you won't have to worry!"

"Come on, if you're coming!" and she slid herself into the water.

Better shot than cooked, I decided, and followed. I found myself wading in knee-deep water, with soft, ankle-deep mud sucking at my boots. Behind us, the fire suddenly roared along the bank, seeming to leap from treetop to treetop, consuming everything immediately combustible, scorching everything else. The air filled with sparks, and the heat was so intense, the smoke so thick, that we were momentarily driven onto the other bank. A cloud of airborne burning bits engulfed us like a swarm of hellish insects, stinging as they alighted on our faces and hands. Breathing was like swallowing heated needles. Our hair and clothing began to smolder, and Elizabeth screamed and started beating at herself. I looped an arm around her waist, forced her back into the water, dunked us both. She pulled free and surfaced several feet away, sputtering and clawing hair out of her eyes.

"Go!" I yelled at her. "Go! Go!"

And we went, blistered, half-blinded, and choking, through Hell.

Everywhere there was fire and smoke and noise and horror. Once, we heard someone in one of the thickets along the bank cry out that he was burning and beg to be shot. His pleas abruptly broke off in a wail of agony that must have persisted for a full minute. Elizabeth unexpectedly grabbed my hand, and I felt her fingernails bite into my palm; under the mud and the soot, her face was bone white.

Farther downstream, as we skirted a fire that burned all the way down

the bank to the water, a flame-swathed figure lurched blindly out of the inferno. It was pawing at itself and moaning hideously, and as it broke through the thicket, burning vines dragged and snatched at it as though to pull it back into the heart of the blaze. It slipped in the mud on the bank opposite us and seemed to dissolve in a boiling cloud of steam.

I covered my eyes with my hands as we plunged past.

In some places there was no fire, only shadows and that infernal, constant pow-pow-pop, now close by, now remote. Once again, we were caught in a cross-fire and lay clutching each other in terror against a reedy bank while bullets clipped small branches and pieces of bark overhead. The shooting quickly rose to a furious crescendo, then died away as abruptly and unexpectedly as it had begun.

When we had heard only distant battle sounds for a long time, Elizabeth leaned close to me and said, "This is it for me. I'm worn out, and I've lost a shoe in the mud. This is as far as I go."

"We aren't safe here."

"We aren't safe anywhere in this goddamn swamp. May as well die here as anywhere else."

"We're not going to die. John—"

"Oh, screw John, and screw you, too," and with that she crawled up the soggy bank and flung herself down on relatively dry ground. There was nothing for me to do but follow her into the thicket. For no reason I could imagine save that I was stuck in character again, I pulled off my ruined jacket and offered it to her. She looked at it and at me with consummate distaste and declined to accept. The whole exchange was leaden pantomime. We were too tired for actual argument any more, thought not too tired to disagree. She wadded up her own jacket for a pillow and apparently fell asleep as soon as her head touched it. I was dead tired, too, and hungry and thirsty as well, but I was too worried to fall asleep. Where was John?

And night fell, but the shooting never died away completely, and neither did the brush-fires. I could hear the intermittent crash of gunfire all about, often punctuated by shouts. The smell of burning was everywhere, and its crimson glow was reflected among the trees and against the sky. One blaze flared up not twenty yards from us. I went forward to keep an eye on its progress, and by its light saw dead men lying among a jackstraw pile of pine trunks. The fire had already gone over them, charring them and their garments beyond recognition and leaving a sickening seared-meat smell hanging about the area. As I turned to leave, I was startled by some firecracker-like explosions among the smoldering corpses—lingering flames were setting off the unused cartridges in the dead men's pouches.

I returned to Elizabeth, sat down beneath a tree, leaned against it.

Though it seemed that I closed my eyes for only a moment, when I opened them, the woods were suffused with a sickly gray light, and somewhere a bird was cawing.

Before me stood a stranger.

He was dressed in rather dusty and shabby dark clothes and carried an antiquated but effective-looking short rifle. The muzzle, which was pointed at my midriff, looked wide enough to accommodate a banana. By his right hip hung an equally antiquated revolver in a holster, by his left, a wooden canteen on a strap. His black slouch hat had seen better days. The shadow of its brim smudged the details of his face above his whiskery chin and solemn mouth.

I raised my hands and showed him my palms.

He gestured with the rifle in the general direction of the burned area and asked, in a low, soft drawl, "You looked at all that?"

I found my voice, but it was barely more than a hoarse whisper. "Y-yes."

"What do you think?"

"It—it's horrible."

The stranger tilted his head back slightly, and something like a smile distorted the solemn mouth. "Oh, I don't know. Those're the first Yankees I've seen in a while that are cooked just the way I like 'em."

I had the distinct sensation of icy fingers stroking my shoulder blades.

"Not much like the videos at all," he said, "now, is it?"

"You're from up the way!"

"You folks ain't from around here, either." The "ain't" sounded like an affectation. "I could tell that even without seeing your trails. You're anachronistic at worst," and he shot a look at Elizabeth, "and inappropriate at best."

Elizabeth was still asleep, with her knees drawn up and her arms wrapped protectively around her head. I knelt beside her and shook her gently. She gave a grunt and a heave, and that was all. I shook her again and got a petulant moan out of her this time. She rolled onto her back, ran her parched tongue over her cracked, blackened lips, peered out from under the arch of her elbow.

"Company," I said, nodding in the stranger's direction.

She blinked, not understanding. I helped her into a sitting position, and then she noticed him. They studied each other for several seconds.

"Another time-traveler," I told her.

Elizabeth looked relieved. I didn't know how to set her straight.

"Judging from your clothes," he said, "or what's left of 'em, I'd say you're just a couple of lost sightseers." There was offhanded contempt in his voice as he spoke the word "sightseers."

"I think she's some kind of reporter—"

"Documentary film-maker!"

"—and I'm from the University of—"

He cut us short with an impatient wave of his rifle. "Where you folks suppose' to be?"

"The Crystal Palace exposition in London, England," I said. "Eighteen fifty-one."

"That so? Then you only missed it by about a dozen years and a couple thousand miles. This is Virginia—"

"Virginia!" Elizabeth and I exclaimed in unison.

"—and it's the first week of May, eighteen sixty-four."

He let us gnaw on that all we could stand. After a while, Elizabeth struck her knee with her fist and bawled, "Where the hell is *John*?"

The stranger made a shushing sound at her with his mouth, a shushing motion with his hand. "My guess is your guide's trying to sort your trail out from everybody else's. There's been a lot of fighting right around here over the last few years, and there'll be some more for a while to come. There was a big battle over by Chancellorsville just last year. Big or little, past or future, each one of these fights has got its own crowd of spectators. You can just see 'em out of the corner of your eye. Well, I guess you can't see any of 'em, since you're just passengers. But when I look, this whole area's all criss-crossed with—it's like seeing one of those time-exposed photos of a highway at night. All streaks of light, except that this ain't just a time-exposed picture. It's double- and triple-exposed a hundred times over."

"May we please have some water?"

Elizabeth had cut in just as he obviously was getting going on a subject dear to him. He stopped and glared and seemed to have to shift mental gears.

"We're very thirsty," she continued. "We haven't had anything to drink since yesterday. We're incredibly hungry, too."

He stared at her for a moment more, then shifted his rifle to draw the canteen strap up over his head. He handed the canteen to me. I uncorked it and handed it to Elizabeth. "You're so gallant," she said as she took it.

"Now don't gulp," the stranger warned her.

She took a gulp and began to cough.

"Serves you right," said the stranger. "Sip."

She gulped again and coughed again.

Since she patently wasn't listening to him, he spoke to me. "Can't give you food. Only got some hardtack and a little salt meat, and it's got to last me a bit. Just make you thirsty again anyway. But you won't starve before your guide finds you and takes you home."

"I'll be sure to mention your solicitude to the folks back home," Elizabeth said, dangerously close to sarcasm. I could have strangled her.

"I'll be obliged if you don't mention my solicitude or anything else to the folks back home."

Elizabeth handed the canteen over to me. I raised it to my lips and took a careful sip. The water was warm and strange-tasting. The idea crossed my mind that tadpoles had probably swum in it, perhaps swam in it even now, but I didn't care, and I swallowed gratefully. Then the idea crossed my mind that burning men may have been extinguished in it as well, and I quickly re-corked the canteen and handed it to its owner. He slipped the canteen's strap back over his head.

"You'd best lay low here till your guide comes. Last thing anybody wants is dead passengers around here, so you keep your heads down. This is a dangerous place for you. Actually—" there was that smile again—"this is a dangerous place for just about anybody. There're Yankee soldiers and Confederates scattered every which way in these woods. You're just off the end of the whole battleline."

Without further ado, he turned to go.

"Wait!" Elizabeth said. "Can't we stay with your passengers until our guide gets here?"

"Don't carry passengers." He was already walking away.

She called after him plaintively, "Can't you *please* take us home?"

He paused, half-turned, touched his hat brim. "Ma'am," he said, "this is home," and with that he strode off and was quickly lost to view and to hearing as well.

I suddenly realized that I had been holding my breath for some time. I let the air rush out of me and sagged deflated against a tree.

"Now there," Elizabeth murmured, "is a truly *weird* person."

"You don't know the half of it."

She looked at me curiously, but I just turned away. My hands and knees were shaking. I didn't know much about the American Civil War, but I recalled reading or hearing that northern Virginia was some of the most fought-over real estate in North America. Anyone who wanted to be a spectator to the Civil War could do worse than to visit Virginia. Anyone who wanted to *live* the Civil War, and had the power to reach it, and didn't burden himself with passengers, could come to this place at this time and stay indefinitely and never run out of opportunities to participate—if not, perhaps, in the crazy hope of changing the outcome, then only, perhaps, with the crazy joy of contributing to the carnage.

I felt those cold fingers brush along my spine again.

"What do you think he meant," Elizabeth said, "when he said this was home?"

"I think," I began, and paused to ask myself if I really wanted to go

on and tell her I believed he meant that this was a mighty fine place to kill people. The answer was no, so I shrugged and lied. "I haven't the faintest idea."

And we fell silent then, and sat almost together in our thicket, fearful and attentive, she listening to the distant incessant clatter of firearms, and I for any sound that might be the stranger returning. I took no comfort from his assurance that he preferred not to have our corpses discovered in his slaughterhouse. Sociopaths changed their minds, too. When, at length, we did hear the unmistakable crack of wood snapping underfoot, both of us uttered hoarse little cries of fright and spun around—just as John stepped out from behind a tree. He beamed at us and said, in his infuriatingly cheerful way, "Not too much for the worse for wear, I trust."

He was dressed as I had last seen him, in a striped cloth suit and a beaver hat. His hair was immaculately waved and curled, and there didn't seem to be a speck of dirt anywhere on his person.

Elizabeth squalled at him in the voice cats use when their tails get caught in doors: "*Where the hell have you been?*"

He looked at her amusedly. "Oh, around. Before that, at the exposition, of course. I think everybody in England must've been there." He fingered his silk cravat, stroked his moustache, looked past her to give me a man-to-man kind of smirk. "Don't ever let anybody tell you that nineteenth-century gals weren't lookers, or that they didn't know how to have a good time."

"John," said Elizabeth, "I am riven with nausea at the mere thought."

He laughed. "I just didn't know you two'd gotten lost. Not at first, anyway. When we arrived in London," and he looked very pointedly at me, "you weren't around," and he looked as pointedly at Elizabeth, "and *she* wasn't around, and I just sort of figured both of you'd run off into the crowd, or, ah, somewhere."

Beside me, Elizabeth groaned in disgust. "Give me a break!"

I took my cue from that and said to him, "We didn't even know each other before we wound up here. We don't seem to like each other now that we have gotten acquainted."

"Pity. She's really not bad-looking underneath all that dirt, you know."

Elizabeth went straight at him, spewing curses. Though he would have made two and a half of her, he retreated, stepping surprisingly daintily through the plant debris as she reached for his lapels with her two very dirty hands. She was half-unshod, however, and there were thorns in the mat of plant stuff underfoot, and it was no time at all before her lavish description of his mating habits was cut short by a yelp of pain. She grabbed her foot and hopped backward a couple of steps to sit on a fallen bole.

I asked myself, bitterly and not for the first time in all the long while I had known John, why *he* had to be the one with the special affinity for my favorite place and period of history. I stepped over to Elizabeth and knelt before her. "Let me see your foot."

"Oh God, what is this? Sight of blood turn you on or—ow! Damn it!"

I showed her the thorn, then tossed it aside. "John," I said, "give me your handkerchief."

I noted with a certain sense of satisfaction that he looked distressed as he drew the handkerchief from his pocket. "This is real silk, Lew. *Silk.*"

"So it is, John, so it is."

"Ah, jeeze."

"God," Elizabeth murmured as I bound her foot, "for a guy who can't find his own ass in the woods, you're such a damn Boy Scout." She said it almost tenderly. Very surprised, I looked up at her face. She smiled fleetingly. After a moment's hesitation, I smiled back. Removing a thorn from someone's foot is vastly underrated as a bonding experience. I felt like Androcles.

Then her attention swung from me and her foot back to John, and she immediately took on the aspect of Mount Pelée about to blow.

"Hey," he told her, "give *me* a break, okay? I did have other people to look after on this little excursion. I *am* sorry about losing you. But you know how it is. These little slippages happen."

Mount Pelée exploded. "*This* little slippage nearly got us killed!"

"But it didn't actually get you killed. And I did come looking for you as soon as I realized that you really *weren't* around. And now I have found you, haven't I? Well? Haven't I?"

Elizabeth sullenly yeah-yeahed. I didn't respond. I was dead tired. All I wanted to do was go home, and he grated on the little I had left that could be grated on. There is no one more smug than somebody who has your signed waiver stashed someplace safe.

A resounding crash of gunfire from downstream made us look around. John's expression was mildly reproachful. "Boy," he said, "everybody seems to have got up on the wrong side of bed this morning. But, as I was saying. Sorry it took so long to locate you. You've really got no idea how many time-travelers are wandering around this area right now, right at this very minute. Their trails are everywhere. I mean, *everywhere*. New trails and old ones, too. Who'd think so many people'd want to come watch two armed mobs chase each other around the countryside? Give me the good times, thank you."

"Let's get out of here," I said wearily. "The battle's starting up again."

He nodded, but he also said, "Where's your spirit of adventure, Lew?"

"Same place as my sense of humor. Gone."

"Boy, I guess so. Well, come on, the twenty-first-century express is now boarding." He stepped closer, gave his spotless gloves a sorrowful look, held out his hands to us. I took one. Elizabeth started to take the other, then held back.

"My hands are dirty," she told him. "Mustn't mess up your nice clean gloves."

She reached out and deliberately wiped her black fingers against the front of his coat.

"Much better," she declared, and entwined her still-nasty fingers with his.

He sighed. "Lady, you are no lady."

"Cut the crap," she said, "and just take us home."

There was a moment's lightheadedness, a sensation of blacking out, and then the three of us were floating together through the treetops, unmindful of gravity and spiky branches alike. Now, as we emerged into the open sky, I saw the vast extent of the forest and caught a glimpse of a road below and ahead, and a long swarm of men. It was only a glimpse, though. Among the trees were many opaque puffs of grayish-white smoke. Rising here and there were columns of darker stuff, some of it shot with red and orange flames. As far as the eye could see, the world lay obscured by a translucent, pungent haze.

Beside me, John said, "I even ran into some visitors from our own future. First time for me. It was some historian with a pack of grad students in tow. Fun bunch *they* were, too, let me tell you. They got all sniffy when I asked 'em about things up the way. Said it was against the rules. Rules? I said, and the old guy just grinned at me and cackled, 'There'll be *laws* one day, and cops, too. Can you imagine? Cops!'"

I remembered the stranger's smile as he talked of Yankees cooked just right, and I nodded, more to myself than to John. I could imagine cops.

Then, suddenly, we were *going*. ●

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by Avram Davidson

Lawson's peculiar collection
of treasures brought back
from voyages to Jamaica, Bali, and beyond,
seemed to take up every inch of space
both in . . . and *under* his house.

art: Pat Morrissey

Steuart had a poor memory for names. Lawson collected bugs and lizards and things. Hughes couldn't jump. There you have it all.

Lawson's broad old house had its single floor high off the ground on posts in order to catch the breeze in hot summers and avoid extra-high tides or storm-driven waves; and like other such houses the underneath had eventually been boarded up to "protect" (as it might be) such items as a couple of old dories or dinghies or skiffs, lots of broken traps and eel-pots, a couple of failed generators, a chancy heater, a kerosene refrigerator or two, several automobile engines, and God knows what else; I never looked. If this cut off some of the cool breezes it also cut off some

of the cold winds, and if it didn't, there was probably a pile of coal, and a cord of wood. And various flotsam and jetsam.

A visit to Lawson's house was a visit to an antique state of amateur science, and the smells of kerosene, old lamps, old newspapers, old books, old socks, old birds, and other things musty and musky and presumably also old. A vast brass microscope held down a heap of yellow and dirty Smithsonian *Reports*. Skins of things moldered on the wall next to ancient calendars. Out of a small hole in a wooden box, once, poured a thing with a head like a bat, body like a cat, and hands like a bird-eating spider; it had orange fur: I forget *what* Lawson said it was. He spoke baby-talk to it, fed it bits of banana, and told me it could have cuddled up in a tea-cup when he first got it. "I'm a widely traveled man," he assured me. "I have a great interest in native dialects and customs and odd corners of the world. *Look* at this ceremonial mask," he invited in a hortatory voice which implied that you had better look; "I got that in Celebes; Sulawasi they call it now. *Look* at the wing-span on those butterflies. I fit twenty of its cocoons into a common matchbox." Something went *bump* underneath the house and Lawson banged on the floor with his foot and the noises stopped.

So might the house of John Bartram or Louis Agassiz have seemed, I thought; though minus of course the kerosene; did any living man or woman still know what whale-oil lamps smelled like? "For Christ's sake *feed* it," the old lady said, speaking for the first time, the holy name suddenly shocking from that sagging flowing old face. "All right, Aggie Brown," Lawson said, not bothered or in haste. I suppose the huge wooden ice-box had come once upon a time from an old restaurant, and when Lawson opened it a wave of cold and corruption came rolling out. I was tempted to use again Aggie's word of emphasis, but—

"For God's sake what is that, Laws?" is what I cried.

A faint simper as he dislodged some log-sized hunks of god-knows-what, ice crystals on the dark-red-and-blue-green; the simper never faltered. "That is horse-meat I buy wholesale from the mink ranch for my German Shepherd police guard-dogs, this neighborhood is not at all what it was," he fumbled with his foot and raised a small trap-door and thrust the frowzy flesh through it and slipped the bolt back all in a few seconds; the odors of the snake house at the zoo were added to everything else in that close fuggy air. A dead boa constrictor smells a lot like a dead fish. But whatever he had just fed was not dead. *That is not dead which does eternal lie, And with strange aeons even death may die*—who had said *that*? Philemon Holland's translation of Pliny's Natural History was surely not in verse, was it? Well, it wasn't Edgar Guest. The old lady flapped her skirts; they could have done with a washing, too. I said that

I hadn't noticed any Shepherd dogs, Laws; and he said (I think he said) that he was "getting some more tomorrow."

Fact, fascination, curiosity, or not, I moved rapidly. "Well, I've got to be going now, Laws—"

The old woman was at my heels going down the stairs and I turned to ask if he were all there but she moved off in another direction as we went out the thick-wired gate which swung back on its weights with a heavy sound behind us. My mind provided me with a picture of an anaconda or a python and Lawson's voice assuring me that it had been no bigger than a garter snake when he had gotten it (but only my mind); then a gust of wind from the not-distant-sea slapped at my face and I realized that I was holding my breath. The air, when I breathed it in again, was salty and fresh. Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I am vast, I contain multitudes.

My neighbor, Wilfred Steuart, was retired from I don't know what; asking him a question was a pleasure because, for one thing, he usually knew the answer, and, for another, he never, ever, insisted on *Why do you want to know?* before he answered. It seemed to him the most natural thing in the world that anyone would want to know anything. And he saw no reason why, if he knew, he should not say; not for him the sad scowl of suspicion: to the pure, all things are pure. "Her name is Agnes Overholt, used to be Agnes Brown. O-ver-holt? Ab-er-crom—" He tasted the syllables. "I got a poor memory for names. She and Art Lawson they used to be childhood sweet-hearts." They *did?* something cried out within me. Lawson, with the face of a withered monkey and non-too-well-scrubbed, either—and old Agnes, whose own face had loosened out of all confinement, and who perhaps was not fanatically clean, either: childhood sweethearts? *Rejoice, young man . . . and young woman, too . . . ere the evil days draw nigh*—that Preacher knew what he was talking about. Even if Lawson showed no signs of knowing that the evil days had drawn more than nigh. And *Hughes?*

Lew Hughes had gone to the same school. What did he do now? Hung around other people's houses, mostly. Didn't actually come *in*, just hung around. Thus informed, I realized that I did know that Lew Hughes was a dedicated loiterer, had known this for longer than I had known I knew. Grey-faced Lewis Hughes, obviously a man with a grievance; and what was it? A general grievance, you may be sure, against anyone any less unhappy and discontented than Lewis Hughes. But specifically because he had some physical ailment for which the United States in Congress Assembled refused to allow him a pension. "Something the matter with his bones or his muscles or his tendons. 'You can *walk*, can't you?' is what I asked him; 'Oh . . . yeah . . . I can *walk* . . . but I can't *jump*—' 'What do ya wanna *jump* for? You wanna be a delivery boy hopping on

and off of wagons?" But he keeps on mooning and moaning that he just can't jump, and he calls it *My Condition* and he claims he got it sleeping in the wet trenches during the War and the Veterans won't give him a pension because it's not Service Connected . . . *they* claim . . . *he* claims, Yes it is . . . *they* say, then how come it took thirty years to find out? Also—"

Also, Hughes was jealous of Lawson on account of Aggie.

"On account of *Aggie*?"

Steuart said, "Why sure. Aggie goes to see Arty Lawson. She doesn't go to see Lew Hughes. *Nobody* goes to see Lew Hughes."

I supposed so; still . . . smelly old dirty addled old Art Lawson? profane, smelly old saggy old Aggie? and sullen old Hughes: *jealous*?

"Know what he says, Lew Hughes? Says that Lawson's got a buried treasure and that when Aggie comes to visit, Lawson digs it up and lets her look at it!" Mr. Steuart laughed. I laughed, too, I didn't know what *he* thought about, but *I* thought about the scene in the Quixote where Sancho Panza's wife confronts him on his return.

What did you bring me, husband?

I brought you some precious jewels, wife.

Show them to me! Show them to me right now!

I will show them to you at home, wife.

Lawson?

Aggie?

You never know.

Not my business.

And Steuart told me that at one time he and Lawson had been "in the Merchants Marine together. We sailed on a *couple* of ships together. All through the South Pacific. All through the East Indias. All through the West Indias, too."

Clem lived next door.

"I cleck *clams*," intoned Clem, looking at me out of his intense and almost Indian-dark face. "I cleck *clams*. I cleck *oysters*. I cleck *mussels*. Believe me, I'm a citizen, and I *earn* my money," he said, bitterly; implications of aliens lolling on federally funded opium couches. "What's the matter a citizen can't own a machine-gun if he so desires? Because the East Coast Liberal Uhstablishment wants to *disarm* the citizens! They think I doe know about them uh-legal orientals being smuggled in offa the boats in the dark a the moan, they think I doe'n observe them Lo-etians or whatever they are slipping and slapping around in the shad-ows, but I observe 'em!" said Clem, coming closer. I feared for my button-holes. "I can *smell* 'em! They eat *fish*! They live on a fish-head and a handful of rice a day and that's how come a citizen can't compete with 'em!" I thought of asking if perhaps they ate oysters, mussels, or clams,

but I desisted. Clem was widely known to possess a large number of items which the East Coast Liberal Establishment had not succeeded in outlawing; and I was by no means satisfied with my ability to move *Faster Than a Speeding Bullet*.

No indeed.

Luigi had the contract to remove garbage and he removed it at his own rate of speed in an ancient truck which no appeals to civic pride had ever persuaded him to replace. Luigi's truck was parked one day very nearly outside the small police station, but even if I hadn't been able to identify it I would have known he was inside the station. First I became aware of a high shrill sound as I approached, then I recognized it as a *voice*, then I realized *whose* voice, then I began to understand elements of what he was saying. *Can't jump he says I can't jump he says Oh my God I was driving along real slow to save my tires and I hear him screaming he was screaming and I seen him running and I seen this thing chasing him*; by this time I was inside and saw O'Dowd the Chief of the two-man police force leaning his heavy hands on Luigi's shoulders. *He was running and he was screaming and I lean over the seat and I hold the door open and I yell jump Lew jump up and he yells I can't jump he screams I can't I can't jump Oh my God oh my God and I slam the door shut*; and then Luigi began to stamp his feet upon the floor and though his voice stopped speaking words, articulate words, his voice did not stop and O'Dowd wrestled him back down into the chair and just then Dr. Stanyan the Health Officer came in walking very fast and in his hand was something I recognized from the War as a morphine syrette and then I saw something else I recognized from the War namely that Luigi was splashed with blood evidently emitted under pressure—

—and then Petey the other policeman took hold of me by the elbow and walked me rapidly to the door; and even when I heard Clem say almost in my ear, "It was a steel-jacketed bullet, I'm a citizen and I had a right—" I kept on going, I did not insist upon my own right as a citizen, but even when the noise of the door stopped slamming Luigi's voice kept on going on and then by and by it sank to a drone and I leaned against a tree and first I was very cold and then I was very sick.

Steuart made a gesture at home when he saw me and began to talk. "Well what a terrible thing, two men dead," he said. "I suppose it was one of those alligators that maybe come up out of the sewer—"

"—that wasn't no alligator and it didn't come up out of no sewer," said Clem.

Steuart yielded the point entirely, "Well, then probably Hughes was poking around looking for Art Lawson's buried treasure but I don't believe Art had any buried treasure; did it *get* out or did Hughes *let* it out, oh of course by accident? well maybe I suppose we'll never know. Art

went quick, that's a blessing, he went just like *that*," Steuart snapped his fingers. "We were *boys* together, him always climbing the trees to get the birds' eggs and such things like that: and now he's *gone*."

Someone else was in the kitchen, Aggie had made tea and she poured it out and it was strong dark tea and she poured rum into it and it was strong dark rum and it was hot in the kitchen and perhaps that was sweat on her eroded old face and then again perhaps it wasn't.

Clem gulped without blowing hardly at all. He must have had a mouth of iron. "It probably come ashore with them aliens from the boats," he said. "What would a *citizen* want with something like that? Of course it's all hushed up, your big moneyed interests, Safeway, 7-11, they doe want no bad publicity, here. *I* didn't want any reward," he said, *gulp*. "*I* didn't want any Carnegie Medal. I just wanted the skin, Jesus I could of made some lovely holsters out of that skin. But you think the Police and the Public Health they even let me have a piece of it? They're Relks," he said, bitterly, *gulp*. "The Chief's a Nelk, the Doctor's a Nelk: all of them Melks they stick together. That's your East Coast Liberal Uhstablishment for you," he said.

"Oh will you shut the Hell up," said Aggie Brown. "Your goddamn grandfather he was no goddamn good either. Lew Hughes he was no goddamn good either."

"Sealed *coffin*," said Clem. Then he held up his cup for more.

"Arty Lawson and me we were in the Merchants Marine," Steuart said. "We went *everywhere*. Like, couple times we went all through the East Indias. Jamoke, where the good coffee comes from? Sullivan's that a great big island, *no* I can't spell it, I ain't got no memory for names, everywhere we went he come back aboard with like natural history samples: bugs: lizards: Monkeys, *lemurs*; he used to smuggle them ashore. Bali—"

"Did your ship call at Komodo?" I asked.

Steuart's lips moved, he was trying out the word. After a moment he shrugged. "It could very well be," he said. "I dunno for sure. Well, a sudden death. Art Lawson I mean, we all—"

"*He* was a damned good man," said Aggie Brown.

Steuart had a poor memory for names. Lawson collected bugs and lizards and things. Hughes couldn't jump. There you have it all. ●

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"Wanting to Talk to You" is Kathleen Ann Goonan's first fiction sale. Ms. Goonan is a full-time writer who attended the 1988 Clarion West Writers' Workshop. Her travel articles have appeared in the *Washington Post*, the *San Francisco Examiner*, and a number of other travel magazines. Ms. Goonan recently sold two other short stories to *Strange Plasma*.

art: Will Brown



WANTING TO TALK TO YOU

by Kathleen Ann Goonan

Hello, there, Denezio. I've been wanting to talk to you. The warm, fragrant winds of distant Italy blow through my heart again whenever I think of you, here in my cold, minuscule cubicle in Tokyo, which smells, not of flowers, but of steamed rice and ancient linoleum.

If I *could* talk to you, what would I *say*? That Tokyo reminds me of a crude model of time as a tesseract that I saw when the studies were new? Yes, it's like that, with all its haunting, hidden fourth-dimensional possibilities pulled close into itself, waiting for the twist of thought which would let lost hyperspace blossom into you. I'm like that cube, too. I expanded with possibilities under your mind's scrutiny. Who wouldn't like to feel infinite, damn you? Now I feel completely bounded, absolutely finite. I'm telling you, it's a pain. Why did I ever publish those absurd hyperspace papers?

I pull my thin wool coat tighter, spill these words onto my screen. My breath puffs in the chilly air, my hands freeze as they dance on the keys in useless frenzy. Who the hell am I kidding? I can't talk to you.

You're *gone*, gathered into the transport like mind-cattle with the others who could make people blossom, shipped through hyperspace—spattered through the cosmos, as far as I know. But then, hyperspace may end up being the flat next door. How happy I would be if I could simply walk down the hall and see you emerge from a door, as surprisingly as the very first time I saw you. Remember? You came out of your roomette on the Franz Schubert Express as it sped through the Alps, stopped in front of me, looked at me with those funny black eyes and said, "Hello, there. Can I buy you a beer?" Just a little European jaunt for Sphere employees, before the big jump, right? With a guest mathematician invited as a speaker, one who knew absolutely nothing about what was going on. Remember how horrified I was when I found *out*? Hysterical, I think that word fits.

I'm sitting in front of a dirty window. Outside are dim winter streets, the local Pinku Saron, and, not far away, the Palace. Six stories below, the street is full of bobbing heads with straight black hair, the resolute workers of Tokyo on their way to work, even on Saturday. They're beautiful to me, these Japanese, since they remind me of you. They hate me, of course—I'm a foreigner, poor and stupid, racially inferior—but pity me, I suppose, more than they hate me. You chose to live in the light-hearted country of your mother; you would understand perfectly my feelings about your father's people! They say my three remarkably obtuse articles inspired the entire situation which lost you and all the others. Ridiculous to blame *me*! But Sphere (how enthusiastically you described this wretched corporation to me) demands that I get them out of their predicament. To make matters worse, they're hardly paying me anything,

but that's really my own fault. I'm so upset that I can't get up the spunk to give them a hard time about it. Sorry to whine, my dear, but it's true.

Oh, but I am making an effort to feel alive. For instance, I blew a lot of yen on the Chrysanthemum Show last week. You would have thought me very silly, but all of the flowers seemed to be emitting particles of light, covering the spectrum, and I remembered the little balcony on the Mediterranean coast where we stood and saw the green flash just after sunset. It was worth the admission to the show just for that, even though I spent so much for that I can't afford heat for a week or so. I'm expecting some checks, but intelligence holds up my mail forever. Well, let them. They'll never figure anything out. There's nothing to figure out. There's no secret "out there." It's all up here, in my poor old head. Right? Oh, of course. So don't worry. I'll figure out how to get the transport back. American geniuses, they can do anything. Just anything.

Dr. Oshima came to my apartment tonight. I made him some espresso in the little machine you got me at the factory in Milan.

I stood alone in the kitchen, where I hadn't pressed the light on, and cut the lemon by the light coming in from the living room. The hiss of steam drowned out the murmur of the neighbor's hv and the memory of your kindness overwhelmed me. Frost feathered the black window, backlit by streetglow to a fantastic neon-washed fractal where the colors changed in waves, much like I imagine time is (and my mind feels definitely awash, changing; I get lost and confused in these new crackling eddies). I couldn't breathe, I doubled up just for a minute in this damned wool coat that I wear constantly just to keep warm (I do want you to have a good picture of what's going on here), because your absence hit me with such pain just then. You don't know how much I want to turn the corner on some new equation and see you staring out of it. I'm trying, I really am, of course I am. But I know you would just be a face, a wisp, the rest of you vanishing uncaptured into vast fields of numbers, of light. That sounds like something you would like. Even enjoy. You would laugh at me, I suppose, and say, poor darling, left behind? I *told* you to come. I begged you. Enter the possibilities. Don't you know how? I'll teach you.

I know you think I'm an idiot for not coming, not trusting. That is, if you *can* still think. I certainly can't.

Anyway, I picked up the tiny white saucers holding the precise cups, with the lemon resting against them like slices of moon, and went into the other room. I didn't feel a bit impolite about saving my last bit of Jamaica Blue Mountain in the freezer and not offering it to Dr. Oshima. The hell with him. I want nothing to do with him. Except that he's all I have left, he possesses the remnants of you as represented by the Sphere

computers, the trail to your redemption from othertime, elsewhere, wherever the hell you've vanished to. Nowhere, I'm afraid.

That's the truth of it, right there.

I set my espresso on the floor and handed the other cup to him. He thanked me with an exaggeratedly deep gassho while seated on my futon couch, the cheapest I could find and still worth a king's ransom, and said, "Doma, Dr. Harris." I've never said, "Call me Emelia." Of course, he pretended not to notice the cold. He'd even taken off his overcoat and folded it carefully next to him.

"Well," he began. I sat opposite him on my little stool and crossed my legs tailor style. I wrapped my cheap, ugly, black coat closer and leaned over to pick up my coffee. He started to talk.

I waited, thinking, as usual, about you.

In the spaces between Dr. Oshima, who vanished and returned several times in a precise, short periodicity, I walked next to you down the Rue St. Martin as the Paris night wind made my ears burn with cold. A tiny relief. I don't notice these things, really. I know I'm just tired. Just losing my mind, that's all. Nothing to worry about.

Of course, dull Dr. Oshima stubbornly regained predominance, sitting there in his neat black suit and emerald green power tie, uttering words which vanished into hyperspace before they hit the air. I watched his mouth move silently, and was fascinated.

I get the feeling you're reading this as I write. But no, that's impossible. Or is it? I mean, rap on the table or something if you've doubled back and can.

Please.

Oh, all right, I'm being silly. Too much Madame Blavatsky when I was young, I'm sure. I'll go on. Talking to myself, that is. That's all I can do.

"We missed you at the Institute this week," Dr. Oshima said. Yes, my hearing had been, unfortunately, restored, in plenty of time for me to endure Dr. Oshima's mundanities, as if it were some sort of penance for remaining in familiar dimensions.

"I work better here," I told him. It's a lie, though. I'm just mooning about you, that's all. I'm not getting much done. It comes in bursts. After each one I feel better, the darkness recedes. But not for long. Thought is like a drug. The kind of thought I need in order to make heads or tails of this situation, anyway.

He took a sip of espresso and said, "Sphere doesn't like you working at home."

Ten smart answers jumped into my mind but I canned them all. They would have flown right past him, sly, sideways, idiomatic jokes, a waste of breath and wit. "If you want to recontain the lost hyperspace," I told him, without a hint of the hysterical laughter I felt welling up at my

preposterous assertion of my own overwhelming value, in which they apparently believe, "You'll have to let me work at home. I can't work at the Institute. It's much too crowded."

"We'll give you your own office."

He meant a three-by-five booth, but it was an astounding offer nonetheless. Quite a concession.

I pressed my sudden advantage. "Just pay me what that would cost. I'll work twice as fast, then. Food is a great incentive to me." Not to mention a movie now and then, those outrageous Indian ones which are so hard to find in Tokyo and so expensive when I do. He takes everything so literally!

His eyes opened wide at that. "You don't have enough to eat, Dr. Harris?"

"I'm tired of being your slave," I said, reckless, throwing caution to the wind. After all, Sphere is the only place where I can make these dreams into reality, the only place where I can net in and combine the thoughts of others with my own and hope that someday they'll amount to a meeting between you and I. Without that, I have no reason to live. So, although you always laughed at me for being slow and cautious, particularly in this matter, you see I *am* able to be wild once in a while. Generally when it's most stupid. I hope you're satisfied.

"I will arrange to have some groceries sent over," he said, as if I were a charity case. I can see it now: noodles, frozen bean cake, a few tubs of miso. A tree's worth of rough disposable chopsticks. Not that I don't like that kind of food. But.

"No," I said. "I want to be paid in yen." And buy my own link to Worldnet, *make* these visions of you real. Or were you ever real? Sometimes I look at the espresso machine and doubt that it's there. Then I touch it, and feel your wrist within the cold gleaming metal and am oddly satisfied, for a second.

But only for a second.

I wish you hadn't gone and committed yourself to Sphere. International corporation notwithstanding, they're assholes and idiots, but you've heard it all before—only now it's so obvious, now that all traces of you and the others are gone. I mean, I've always felt that the Earth holds plenty of possibilities, but now that the possibility of *you* in my future is gone, I don't know if I can think again. Ever. This is purely my last effort in that direction. When I fail to recover the transport, as will most certainly happen, since this is all quite impossible to begin with, I will probably go the way of Rimbaud. You did call me a poet, didn't you? I know I laughed at the absurdity, but I've come to the conclusion that perhaps there is a similarity between that lost poet and me. I could easily stop this, vanish, never be heard from again in any journal, ever. I've

withdrawn my lot from the side of the engineers, and I'm looking for the poet's entrance to whatever stage there might be. If there is any stage at all, or even any *concept* of a stage. Can you help me find the door in this new endeavor? You opened so many doors for me that it's quite painful to think that our odd collaboration has ended. Even mathematicians need a muse, you know. If I hadn't *thought* toward you, so long and hard before I even met you, if I hadn't been led on by what was most certainly a very real light in your heart, I could never have written those papers.

Now, without you, everything hurts, and I don't even care. I wonder why people go on living, listen to music, pursue their ridiculous pleasures.

Yes, it's very late, but the coffee has kept me up. Dr. Oshima left long ago. He really didn't have much to say. Outside my dirty window, it looks as if it's getting light.

Do I know Dr. Oshima, or what? Like the back of my hand. This afternoon, about the time I finally woke up, there was a knock on my door. A thin boy wheeled in an enormous crate containing soba—three marvelous varieties of all-purpose noodles—and, what did I tell you, miso—in three flavors also—and three types of bean cake, silky, firm and hard. Ah, what riches. The bastard.

I like it that the water boils so violently when I throw them all together, with some onion and garlic, that everything falls to pieces. Most un-Japaneselike. I sip the result in my little room with steamed-up windows. I look at the sunlight on the wood floor. I turn on the computer and watch the cursor blink. I turn it off. I hug a pillow. I cry.

I took the new Shinkansen line to Kyoto today and was followed by spies the entire time. They think I want to get away from the project, but they're wrong. The concept of a day off is simply beyond them, shocking. I laughed as I bought my ticket in the gleaming Shinkansen station, laughed as I lined up like a good child with the businessmen to wait for the train to stop precisely where the first person in line stood. They thought I had no yen to speak of, and the ticket was quite expensive, though, of course, only the fraction of the cost of a link. But who am I kidding? There's nothing in Worldnet that could possibly help. It's just that I miss you so. I have to do something. I feel so guilty, I want to go back and shake you! I want to say, "I was joking, Denezio, *joking*. Hyperspace isn't *real*. It's a mathematician's game. Not even the finest engineers Sphere can buy could make it real."

I suppose I did tell you that. Many times, especially on that last, horrible day, before you ran out the door, determined to trust Sphere instead of me, and vanished, though I tried to find you everywhere, tried

to slip through security to reach you, and would have done anything to make you stay.

Or was it that I had decided to go with you?

You went because you wanted to, because it was, for you, a beautiful thought. It used to be for me, too. It should have stayed that way. Foolish, foolish, for anyone to ever think it would work. I could have told them then. Why didn't they consult me sooner, before it was too late? Well, *part of it worked, didn't it? You are gone.*

As I watched the big green kilometer per hour readout at the front of the car climb to 200 and stay there, I wondered where that money in my account came from. Not from Dr. Oshima, I'll bet. I just got it in my head to check my balance this morning, thinking to find it pitifully low or even negative, and couldn't think of a better thing to do with the surprise surplus than go to Kyoto.

There have been windows, lately, Denezio. Windows. Lovely, bright. I keep writing this to you. It seems to help. It's hard to tell you what I mean by windows, but maybe you'll understand better as I talk. I think I may abandon numbers. They do me no good. Talking to you is much, much better. After all, there's nothing they can do if I don't deliver. They know they're asking the impossible.

How desolate it makes me feel just to write that.

The wind was raw as I came up through the ceramic tunnel from the Kyoto station, after stuffing myself on the Shinkansen with all kinds of overpriced bentos. I walked up and up the streets, through quaint clean alleys lined with tiny, unattended open shops and cold/hot machines—beer on one side, strong canned coffee on the other—to a temple which looked out over the city. Like everything else in Kyoto, they claim it's "ancient." But not like your beloved Rome! Ancient, in Japan, means that the *form's* been here. The idea. The *materials* are replaced constantly.

I looked out over Kyoto, far below, with its gray river and noren-shaded okinomiyake cafes, its infinite temples and eel-shops, suddenly and acutely aware that the red-painted balcony on which I stood, the enormous rough black beams I ducked beneath, were part of a reverently tended *idea*.

It made me think.

It made me think, what if what is *happening* is a carefully tended idea?

And then: what if the materials were replaced, now and then, with something completely new and different?

Yes, what about that?

I rode the bus to get to the Golden Pavilion, my spies shivering a few seats behind me while I nestled in the nice thick down coat you bought me in Innsbruck—remember Innsbruck? Do you? *I don't, somehow, only that you got me this coat there, the little shop suffocatingly full of im-*

possibly bright ski-colored clothing, the amusement in your eyes, the way you bit my tongue as we kissed. *Did* we go there? Or is this a window?

That is to say, I'm *sure* I didn't have this coat before yesterday. That's when I mentioned how much I disliked the black one. This morning I opened my closet and found this glowing purple-and-pink masterpiece of warmth, and looked in vain for the black thing I'd found on sale. I'm glad it's gone. It was so ugly.

Anyway, sweetheart, about the Golden Pavilion.

Several hundred Japanese were there, lasering the place with their hv cameras. Quite amazing. Wish I had the patent on that camera. Then I could surely afford to figure out where you've gotten to without the support of Dr. Oshima, who obviously thinks a few more noodles will get me over the hump. I wish you'd stop this silly game. I'm sure you can read this as I write, from wherever you are, and are laughing your head off.

Were we ever in Innsbruck?

One of the monks here at the Golden Pavilion went mad, declared that Buddhism and life were crazy, and burned the whole damn place to the ground. What a lovely fire it must have made! I so admire him. I imagine the magnificent carp in the surrounding Kinkaku-ji, the mirror-pond, darting out of the way when the burning beams broke through their billowing sky, sizzling and sudden, then casually returning to their feeding. Lacking all curiosity, that's the main thing I'm getting at here.

What I'm getting at here is that I'm no carp.

Stop laughing, I'm serious. I *do* pay attention. You always said I didn't, but I am now, believe me. You must practice zazen as if your head were on fire, I read in a little brochure at the temple. I'm paying attention now as if my head were on fire.

It is.

Of course, the Japanese rebuilt the temple, regilded it. Here I am, standing next to it, being included in twenty-five different home hv's. Smile, foreign woman, wave. How the temple glows, even on this dank, sunless day. The Golden Pavilion is an extremely well-tended idea. I won't hv it for you, or the Kinkaku-ji which represents the state of enlightenment, its many tiny islands laced with leafless trees. If only I could stretch out into particles like the surface of the pond, become the interface between the phases and let you crash into me, on fire, burning, transmitting your bright flame to me. No, I won't hv it. You have better means of seeing things, don't you?

Don't you? Why do you torture me? I have only inadequate numbers, while you fly free through hyperspace, or *some-space*, frolicking your head off.

I do so miss you. Did I say that? I suppose I did.

I'm sorry I got so upset with you just now. The coat is very nice. I needed it. Japan is cold. It was good to see you.

In Innsbruck.

I went down to a little noodle shop for breakfast this morning and caused a flurry by ordering something American. "Pancakes?" said the man doubtfully, politely. You would think I could leave politely out, wouldn't you? But the politeness here is so pervasive, I really can't. "Pancakes," I said firmly, pointing to them on the menu. I know for a fact that in downtown Washington, D.C., you can get anything Japanese you damn well please, morning, noon, or night.

They were raw in the middle, but that was all right. Nice try. Sweet of them. They smiled hopefully and I smiled back reassuringly and broke off little pieces of pancake with my chopsticks.

I used the house matches and lit one of those horrible generic American cigarettes, and wished I had something nice to smoke, too. Sometimes it helps. These make my throat raw, but they're all I can afford, damn them. Kyoto took all my yen.

All right, now that you ask, I'm quite upset. Yes, that's why I've started smoking again. They say your transport may never return, that there's been some sort of fatal error, that all their resources are going into mustering the energy to pull it back out, that they know about me and you and for the love of mike *do* something, American genius.

Why the hell did you *want* to go, idiot?

Why the hell didn't *I* go, too?

A bit of a breakthrough today, my dear, thank God. They keep nagging me to come in to work, but since I stuck to my guns they've really revved up my resources, brought in the most amazing system, and I have access now to Worldnet at last, the tightwads. It's as if they didn't trust me before, and I'm sure they don't now, but they suspect I know something. They *hope* I know something. They're *counting* on me knowing something. They don't even seem to care, at this point, if I slip Sphere's secrets through Worldnet to another country for vast riches. Big of them.

Guess what? I went out last night about two A.M., no problems with crime in the Tokyo streets and I was so warm with that nice coat from Innsbruck (I do like to give you a hard time), and I happened across a little kiosk that sold Tolstoy Primes, remember, my favorite cigarette, and so hard to find no matter where you are. How patiently you followed me while I went through every damned shop in Cannes, looking for them while the French laughed so cuttingly at my accent that I was reduced to holding up the pack. *Wonderful* cigarettes, you wouldn't think that

it was possible for such perfect cigarettes to be made in this world. Very odd picture on the cover, Russian peasants from a century ago. I'm looking at it right now. It's as if I've never seen it before. In fact, I'm almost *positive* I haven't seen it before.

Do you know what I mean?

Ah, but I'm smoking one as I write, and I'm happy. They're only a few blocks away, and so cheap. (We *were* in Cannes—weren't we? Of course we were. I remember taking the night train, and how the thieves opened the door a crack, you told me so even though I was sleeping, and then the people next door shouted two hours later "We've been robbed" and you were so amused that I didn't wake up even then. There was another little shop where we bought cheese covered in ash. Isn't that so? *Isn't* it? *Funny* world now, where the Russians make the cigarettes, and getting funnier by the minute. You see, I'm getting less and less serious, less and less worried about such things. I suppose you're excited about that development, but it bothers me.)

I should have bought more Tolstoys, I suppose, but somehow I fancy the walk, when I hunger for another pack, look forward to going through Tokyo in the sleet, late at night, with the Palace looming like the Kremlin down the street while taxis zoom like secret jewelboxes, like grandma's lace-covered parlor, and neon flashes at the Pinku Saron just on the corner. I breathe the cold air deeply, and hope for the time when you return.

Well, now I have my Tolstoys. I smoked three of them at once, and felt dizzy.

So what else is new, you say.

They're gnashing their teeth and weeping, not to mention pulling their gorgeous black hair, at least Dr. Oshima is whenever he comes around, with his nonsense about the lost transport, that's what's new. Didn't I tell you yesterday? You have this odd sort of amnesia, my dear. What fools they all were, weren't they, thinking they could contain this sort of thing, thinking that they could turn a profit (a *great* profit!) with this hyperspace transport theory. And deciding it would be manned (womanned?) by those with an odd sort of brain wave. Like *yours*. What a lot of trouble they went to, getting all of you together. But then, they're so efficient. Just a matter of roaming through Worldnet, getting a fix on anyone ever involved in those experiments on creativity.

Remember when I first saw you? I mean, after we walked to the dining car, when I sat across the table from you with that enormous stein of beer between us? The thing that interested me about you were the waves of light emanating from you, from your eyes, like a physical pleasure I could actually feel, from your face, so bright it overwhelmed me, from

your heart, yes, I could *see* it, beaming through your clothing with such beauty I wanted to be very, very close to it. Certainly, you were quite unique. I never knew that could even happen. If anyone had told me, I'd have laughed.

Funny how the Japanese can measure such qualities. But they're so very precise, and yet used to thinking in terms of a very tangible beauty. I'm sure they didn't really need any of the others. You did it all yourself.

But where does that leave *us*?

I keep thinking, what if it's all right *here*, the idea I so desperately search for, that within which I live? Live, move, and have my being, right? That's what I thought last night when I returned from the movies. It was late; I like it late, I like it lonely, except I don't feel so lonely lately. I appreciate that immensely.

For now, you see, windows are everywhere. It's as if I've been on the inner side of something all my life, like a womb, and now the meaning outside it has begun to leak in, to radiate in, to burst in, to blast its way in with a window out of which I can actually step.

And shall I?

That is my question now, you see, Dr. Oshima. That is my question now, Denezio, you who laughed at what you called my "immovable objectivity," which you've dissolved by looking over my shoulder and calling my name with every means at your disposal—that is to say, with side-walks, flower shows, the clothing I slip on in the morning while still shivering under the covers, and even with the blank greyish wall of my room. Damn you!

Immovable objectivity has its comforts, you know. It's familiar.

Oh, you're wondering if I ever loved you, if I even know what love means?

I know very well what it means.

It means that I sit here thinking, wondering how it is that you, who are vanished into the particles of time and space, have sublimed my pain into yourself.

It means that you give me these silly physical things, these coats, cigarettes, and yen, as if I were a dolt, or a child, someone who has a lot of trouble catching on. Someone who needs a little push.

It means that, like someone who is mentally retarded who catches a glimpse of herself as others see her, I cry because my heart is broken.

Broken open with wonder and pain.

Sometimes it takes a while to admit what one already knows.

Don't ask me any more questions tonight. I'm tired.

It's late. I'll feel better in the morning.

I don't know why I'm bothering to write this. Of *course* you know.

Either you know, or my heart is shattered into a million pieces forever. Probably both. Yes, still and ever the dramatic one. But I mean it.

I went to Dr. Oshima and said, "I'm quitting." There's been an air of great resignation at Sphere lately, now that it's certain the transport won't return (no matter how much they want to continue fooling themselves, and no matter how much money they spend in the process, I know that) and much international hullabaloo about how horrible it all is.

I don't understand that at all. It's wonderful.

It's getting to be spring in Tokyo. The wind is tinged with distant warmth. The Akihabara with its electronic stores seems more hospitable now, and I carefully compare prices and products with those in my New York catalog. I want a very fine disc player. There is wondrous music in the world, did you know? I intend to hear it. Then I got lost on my way to the Ueno last week, wanting to see a new calligraphy exhibit, and it didn't bother me to wander around for an hour, following the smiling wrong directions the Japanese quite politely and unintentionally gave me, since they didn't understand my question, but thought that they did.

It's much more beautiful here than it seemed at first. Even the dark industrial streets between the freeways with their foreign, impenetrable signs, so grim in winter, seem bright to me now. I asked the embassy to extend my visa and they did.

I still have plenty of Dr. Oshima's noodles. I boil them quickly, carefully, and drop in exactly three green sprigs of onion and two tiny cubes of the finest silky tofu, bought at the little shop around the corner where the tofu master, a woman, gets up at midnight to pulverize the soybeans, boil them, strain them, coagulate and drain them, and float them like white, perfect boats on a sea of fresh, clear water.

Yes, I still persist in telling you everything. A habit, a mild habit.

Remember what Dr. Oshima shouted? "Don't you understand? If you quit, you'll never see him again!"

He's the one who doesn't understand.

When I slip my arms into my coat, I know I am entering you.

When I walk down the hall to the elevator, there you are. Always, with each step. Within the eyes of everyone.

I even wrote a poem. It goes,

"In no future do I reside

When in this land of flowers

I have been always this person passing

In the street."

I told you this would happen. Or did you tell me?

I am infused with the springtime to come, and am glad. I know how curious you are about the names of all the flowers, and I'm learning

them. In Japanese. How do you say "Spider Chrysanthemum" in Japanese? That's tomorrow's lesson. Or was it yesterday's? You will excuse me, of course, if I forget. It's your fault, after all.

How lucid, how communicative, the very air seems. But that's because it is spring, liquid, positive spring. Soon I will be able to leave my coat behind.

But now, right now—oh, it reminds me of you. ●

NEXT ISSUE

New writer **Greg Costikyan** makes his *IASfm* debut next month with our explosive February cover story, "Bright Light, Big City," a taut, suspenseful, and (alas!) all-too-probable tale of the game of international terrorism played out on a very big scale indeed, for very big stakes, and of one ordinary man's nail-bitingly tense effort to get out from under before it all comes crushing down on him.... Multiple Nebula Award-winner **Pat Murphy**, author of the classic story "Rachel In Love," is also on hand for February, taking us to the wild days of the early West to join a wagon train heading out across the lonely immensities of the prairie, and to meet a little girl who will soon find herself headed for strange destinations with companions far stranger than she could have ever imagined, in the evocative "Travelling West."

ALSO IN FEBRUARY: new writer **Jonathan Lethem** makes a memorable *IASfm* debut with the compelling and powerful story of "The Happy Man," a darkly fascinating look at the roots of obsession; then, together again for the first time, World Fantasy Award-winner **James P. Blaylock** and two-time Philip K. Dick Award-winner **Tim Powers** (making his *IASfm* debut, except for a Guest Appearance in a Bruce Sterling story we published some time back) join forces to bring you a story about small towns, space travel, ether bunnies, and, most important of all, big fat ripe juicy tomatoes, told as only they could tell it (*tomatoes?*). In the funny, bittersweet, and weirdly evocative saga of "The Better Boy" (yes, tomatoes.); **Lisa Mason** returns with a compassionate study of life on the borderland of death, in the lyrical "Hummers"; gonzo SF writer **Neal Barrett, Jr.** (author of those cult classics "Perpetuity Blues" and "Ginny Sweet-hips' Flying Circus") returns in a somewhat more somber mood to take us on a disquieting journey "Under Old New York"; the always-surprising **Don Webb** sweeps us along with him to an isolated expatriate household in the shadow of the distant Himalayas, and unravels the chilling secret to be deciphered from some "Letters From Sarah"; and new writer **Tony Daniel** returns with an elegant little story about the power—and the deadly danger—of "Words." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our February issue on sale on your newsstands on January 8, 1991.



BIRD SUPERIOR

by Kathe Koja

Dell Books will debut its new
horror line in February with
Kathe Koja's first novel,
The Cipher. Other recent
sales include stories to *F&SF*,
Pulphouse, *Universe*, and *The*
Year's Best Science Fiction.

art: Roger Raupp

In the instant before the plane hit, he thought about the rabbit.

Ball of stumbling fur, right hind leg wrenched brisk and brutal, the stupid, almost cartoon, wideness of its eyes, and he, swerving, trying not to hit it too. Again. Failing. The bloody fluff of its tail.

What a thing to think about, just before you die.

Cartoon character, him too, eyes as comically wide: Where am I? A hospital, that was obvious, less obvious the reason. What hurt? Nothing, so far as he could tell, but that could just be drugs. Unless he was dead and this was one of those out-of-body experiences. He *seemed* to be in his body, but how could you actually tell? He was in no shape to pinch himself. No mood, either, actually.

Emergency room. Not a central treatment area, a waiting room of some kind. Temporary storage? Maybe. If I can get someone to notice me, he thought, then I'll know I'm alive.

Green and baggy, white coat, stethoscope shine, and cold brown hands, and his own timid voice: "Excuse me?" Am I alive? "Excuse me."

"Yes," businesslike friendly, not-impatient smile. "Mr. . . . Mr. Kidler. John. How're you feeling, John?"

Alive, and with a vengeance. A name, even. "Fine," he said. "Am I hurt?"

"Well, you sustained a head injury, John, you've got some stitches in your scalp. Right across here," touching a numb line across, presumably, his head; he could see part of the gesture, but felt none of it. "Do you remember very much of what happened?"

"I remember." The rabbit. No. "The plane was in some kind of trouble, something about hydraulics?" Hopefully. Like a student, offering information to a notoriously exacting professor. Encouraging nod; it worked; he went on. "The flight attendants told us to assume crash positions, and we, and I did, and—" And *what*? Nothing. A small grayness, from there to here. The width of a scalp wound. "I'm afraid that's all I really remember."

"That's all right. It's pretty common," penlight in the eyes, were his pupils responding as pupils should? Blood pressure cuff. The gentle strobe of the stethoscope as the overhead light brightened, his own light above his own little moveable bed. "It's a built-in safeguard, with this kind of accident trauma." Pause to take his pulse. "You'll remember when you're ready, probably within a week or two. Maybe more, maybe less. Different people react differently." Chart in hand, writing, absent nod of reassurance. "Nothing to worry about. Your main problem will be some discomfort in the area where the stitches are, but a couple aspirin every few hours should take care of that."

"Will I be going home soon?"

"We're going to keep you overnight, keep an eye on you. It's SOP for head injuries, nothing to be concerned about." Put the chart back, patting the metal U of the bedframe as if it were an extension of his body that could be soothed by touch. "If you have any problems, give a holler," and *gone*, and he left alone to trace, with clandestine embarrassed fingers, the line of stitches, his only evidence of cheated death.

Waking groggy and cold, his head and eyesight dull. An airline person was there. Bright anxious smile, how are you feeling today, Mr. Kidler? For a minute, he thought the woman was a nurse, until he saw, again, her blue suit, her chipper little tie. Nurses don't wear ties.

Chipper voice, too. He would of course be flown first class to his destination city—

"Detroit."

—as soon as he was ready to travel. Yes. Not, note, "well enough" to travel. "What happened to the other people on the plane? Was anyone—was anyone hurt badly?"

No. No, thank goodness. Most of the passengers escaped serious injury, the plane itself sustained some structural damage; talking like a press release, but obviously nervous enough to shit water. He took her card, let her go; exactly one hour later, another airline representative, this time definitely legal, was on the phone. This one was harder to get rid of, but he managed, afterward called the nurse, the real nurse, can I have an aspirin please?

Bitter dry taste in the back of his mouth. He slept most of the day, not drugged but simply tired, the body exhausted, maybe, by the furious inner work of healing; no one told him that, but it made sense. The next day, they told him he could go home. The airline said they were holding a first class seat, they were sending an airline limo, would twelve thirty be convenient?

"Twelve thirty would be fine."

It was not until he was actually in line at the gate that he considered the concept of fear: fear of flying, to be specific, suggested to him by the mournful avidity of a fellow passenger, inevitably noting the Frankenstein panache of his stitches, his partially shaven head.

"Aren't you scared to fly, now?"

And he smiled, a dry modest little grin, but there was actually nothing to it: fear of *crashing*, yes, perhaps a new appreciation of the force of gravity, but he felt no apprehension at the idea of flying, felt, in fact, nothing at all. Perhaps if he could remember the crash itself, things might be different, but things were things, and he settled in his seat, buckled in, closed his eyes; he had done it a million times before. Though not, of course, in first class.

At work, he was a minor celebrity; it wore off before the stitches came out, which was fine with him. What was the drama? A car wreck would have been worse. Certainly that roadkill rabbit thought so. Roadkill Rabbit, brought to you by Firestone Tires. If it had been a bird, now, it might have lived, able to take wing in the crucial second, able to find escape by rising. Pigeons did it all the time, blind nonchalant waddle before the oncoming wheels, and then, just when death seemed inescapable, they rose, like swaggering preteens before an exasperated car: Let's see how close we can get!

His head itched, where the stitches had been, where the new hair grew; it wasn't growing in quite right, not coarse and grayish-brown like before, but downy. He frowned at it after showers, in mirrors, and then forgot about it.

He had begun to watch the pigeons, when he drove; they seemed to like roosting in underpasses, though you never saw them on sidestreets. Sparrows, on sidestreets, but they were a prudent group, skittish at the slightest sound of wheels. He liked to watch the incongruous seagulls, in from Lake St. Clair, stealing garbage from the dumpsters at the fast-food places where he sat eating lunch. Sometimes he saved the dry rind of his hamburger bun for them, maybe a couple of fries, the little ones nuked to near-stucco consistency at the bottom of the container. The birds didn't care.

Still he had no memory of the crash, though once he thought he dreamed of it: a smell like smoky plastic, the shrill staticy hum of the flight attendant's voice. The dream caused him no particular dread, left no larger residue of remembrance. He told his doctor about it. She was a big fat woman who didn't take shit and didn't believe in anything, including medicine.

"So what?" she said. "Did it start your head hurting again? No? Then forget about it." She told him to take aspirin, and, if he kept having dreams, write them down and sell them to the movies. "Terror on Flight 505," she said. "One man's story."

In the mornings, he heard the birds, not soft and sweet as he had always thought of birdsong, the idea of birdsong, but sharp, the efficient language of those without small talk. They woke him up too early, but he didn't mind. He even considered getting a window-feeder, but was put off by the idea of birdshit stains on the side of the house.

All of this changed when he began to fly.

It was nothing he noticed right off; you don't wake up in the morning and decide you're going to fly, not even if you're the kind of person who has always dreamed of that quintessential freedom, which he was emphatically not: his dreams were more the hopeless Nobel variety, stun-

ning some vast crowd with the fruits of his intellect, ha. At first he thought it was some sort of horrible delayed reaction, some insidious psychosis taking hallucinatory root: standing there in the cold morning driveway, bare feet an inch from the concrete as his lazy arms waved, what the hell am I *doing*? Two inches, three, his arms in perfect balance, his weight distributed and accounted for without the slightest thought, what the hell is *wrong* with me? Crazy. Crazy. He stopped his arms moving and dropped lightly to the balls of his feet, quick loping walk to the front door, stood trembling inside. He drove to work with the windows shut, afraid somehow that he might pull over in traffic, attempt to fly through the fummy air of rush hour, whee, look at me!

Birdsong, next morning, still completely incomprehensible, and he was grateful, less so for the nagging sense not of memory lost but of thoughts forever inaccessible, profound changes made in those blank moments, the fruit of which he was only now experiencing. Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you the Bird Man. Without thinking, absent flapping in the shower, only noticing when the swirling water, victim of a balky drain, did not lap as usual at his ankles. Blowing his hair dry, and a sudden suspicious peer in the mirror, that downy patch, oh for God's sake don't say it. Don't ever *say* it out loud. There was no idea in him to tell anyone, share this delusion, even to prove that that was all it *was*; frightening enough the idea he might be going quietly post-traumatically mad—but what if it were true? What if he really were able to fly? By the power vested in me by a near-fatal aviation accident, I now pronounce you bird superior. Lift up your wings and fly. Forget about it. Forget about it!

So much time spent in wasted nervous speculation, the guilty staring out of windows at the shadows of circling birds, work not so much suffering as, yes, grounded, the simplest problems taking longer and longer to even comprehend, much less solve, the daily equation of life now more riddle than plain sum, and he asked for a long weekend, and got it. Packed a gym bag and went up north.

The Interstate was visual white noise, landmarks he'd passed so often he need never see them again to know his way. Styrofoam cup of coffee, some stale chips, he drove without stopping. A campground, finally; he had been there many times, first with family, then buddies, and now standing by the hot hood of his car, finishing a well-deserved piss, the sun gone down and all the birds abed.

He slept in his car. No one there would check, it wasn't that kind of park. In the morning, the stale reek of the log-cabin restroom, washing his face to the furious dawn accompaniment of a thousand birds, or at least it seemed so, so many calling out at once. Barefoot, careful stride into the woods, surely it was too early for any watchers, any bored or

curious eyes, and he stood, suddenly sheepish, and as suddenly businesslike: *right*. You came all the way out here, now do it.

Rising.

Tremoring arms, nervous airless excitement mixed with a healthy horror of his apparently unconditional surrender to the strange, but he was *doing* it, he really was. He was flying! Five, maybe fifteen, maybe eighteen feet off the ground, clumsy in the trees, sweat in his eyes and running down the wondering grooves of his gape. Wide-eyed. You bet.

The questions fell away with the ground below; there were maybe answers, but he would never make it past maybe, so. His arms got tired more quickly than he had imagined, but of course that made its own sense; of course muscles tire. He wanted, bravado, to land on a branch, but found himself unable to judge which might bear his weight. He was too far up to quibble, so he chose instead the safer option of the ground, stood shivering with cooling sweat in the sudden shade of a tree whose topmost branches he had only just inspected, marveling suddenly on the true nature of perspective from a perspective that no one else could share.

Of course, there was no chance of duplicating this stunt back home, in the neighborly confines of one-story houses and sensible streetlights; he must do all his aviating here and now. He rested a while, hiked deeper, found a spot where he could see anyone coming—and why not, circling up in the green, the air so much different there, in ways that, ground-bound, he could never have believed. He stayed up as long as his muscles dared, then, with bumbling exquisite caution, found a branch, a lower branch than he wanted, but one that looked substantial. And perched.

No one saw him, no birds approached him, that strenuous learning day, though he saw plenty of spoor, shit and feathers enough to last a lifetime. He made his final approach at dusk, prudent in the last of the light, too hard to fly in the dark without radar. If he were a bat, now. You're an asshole, he told himself—perversely proud, rubbing aching biceps as he marched himself back to his car—an asshole, that's what you are. He was too tired to drive, too sore to spend another night on the front seat. Back by the interstate there were motels, and he found one. Slept so hard he woke sweating, then slept again.

The weekend was all work, delightful, exhausting; it was amazing all there was to know, how in God's name did real birds do it? Instinct, of course, where he was learning the hard way, the hit-and-miss way—but then again, he didn't have to eat grubs, either. When he got into the car for the trip home, he wondered, Could I make it, flying? Could I? No—reluctantly, listening to the efficient gassy turnover of the engine, no, not enough stamina. Not yet.

And then shook his head at himself, amazed that one weekend could have eaten such holes in his common sense. Do you think you're invisible?

Or don't you think a flying man is unusual enough to stop traffic, even on I-75? Asshole, he called himself again, less kindly now, for he preferred his first reaction; he did not want to have to think in groundling terms. All the drive home, he memorized the past days, the pure lack of not only care but the thought for care. Perhaps the feeling was that it *was* all feeling, no thoughts beyond the physical, could it really be as simple as that? But if that were so, wouldn't, say, puberty then be holy, wouldn't the silent squeal of orgasm, the grunt and strain of a bowel movement, even though had cheaply, be just as pure? *Was* there nothing mystical to be had? Nothing deeper than the sheer surface fact? Epiphany: love it or leave it.

It was hard, that night, to sleep in his own bed. He roiled the covers, the silent weary toll of the bedside digits making him more tired still but luring sleep no closer, and, at last, to calm himself (he said), he gave in: rose, a gentle stately indoor flight, once around the room and watch those turns. Mindful of the ceilings, of the frustrating low-bridge doors, he flew all around the house, twice. Arms alive, body soothed by the comfortable ache of muscles rehearsing newly learned tasks, he flew until his eyes would not stay open, then perched atop the metal storage cabinet in the laundry room, and fell to peaceful sleep.

Wake, early as is now usual, in some high spot: the fat overhead ledge of kitchen cupboards, the welcoming bookcase top. Eat breakfast, eggs over ironically, drive to work while playing the new game: distance calculated in air miles, how long would it take you to get to, say, Atlanta from here? Phoenix? Seattle? How about *Paris*, you think you're ready for a transatlantic flight? He knew there were birds who did that very thing, flew unimaginable migratory distances, curlews or swallows or something; he didn't know the species, his new state of being had not led to any passion for ornithology. Imagine going back to Capistrano every year and being glad about it.

At lunch, he continued his dumpster custom, finished the workday with a sense, not of a job well done but a loan of time now completed for his day; fortunately he was a patient man. How much money would it take to live for a year, flying? Always assuming of course no capture, no eventual cage. This much? And how long will it take to work for it? Very well then.

And always at night, the solo flights around the house; he was expert by now at avoiding lintels, ducking his head without having to think about it. Such a specialized ability, but no real need to be proud of it, birds did it all the time. All the time.

He still did not recall the plane crash, doubted now he ever would, certain that the memory was given in trade for what he had now, this

elegant skill. Did it matter? Certainly not; he had blundered somehow into far the better of the deal, had at times in fact a lurking feeling of unease: would it, somehow, be repossessed? And answered himself: Hopefully not while airborne, but knew in the calm secret silence of his mind that even if that were so he could not care or mourn; what was living, after all, without this gift? The familiar pattern of the carpet beneath him, stained like a flight plan, the dust in unexpected places; his orbit was small, but he cherished every inch of it. Once a month, the longer journeys, exquisite in their furtive challenge, building up those chest muscles, learning to taste the oncoming change of weather like a creature born to it. In no way was it reversion; he was definitely moving up.

What friends he had, at work, in the neighborhood, he had left behind almost from the start; there was no way to share this, and there was nothing else he cared to share. He was pleasant, perhaps more distant than before, but people notice less than we believe, their full attention a tithe not lightly paid; he discovered this fact early and traded on it in an absent way. Mowing the grass, a casual wave, a morning pleasantries here and there, already so far away. The bank balance growing, but not quickly enough; he sold some things, he would never need them now anyway, how much you want for that snow blower? Yeah? Leaf bagger for sale too? What're you up to, John, moving to Florida? His smile, pleasant smile; it said, who, me?

In the dark, up above the kitchen floor—seeing in memory to come the sweep of his arms, oars of flesh as he moved through the air, sizzle of the sun above much closer now. How wonderful it would be to fly at night, far safer, but though he had considered it with obsessive care, even armed with his new expertise it was regrettably impossible; he simply did not have the eyesight for it, and a light was out of the question: what's that, Earl? I don't know, but we better shoot it down. He had no intention of ending his flight in some redneck's trophy room. Dawns, it would be, and careful—oh fanatically careful—day flights, staying low and rural. He had even designed a backpack device, matchstick contraption of balsa and thinnest synthetic silk, the kind hang gliders use: if absolutely caught and cornered, he would give it to them with a show of vast reluctance, and then, with luck, escape. He was going to need luck no matter what; it was not a dismaying observation, nor paradoxically gleeful: he neither sought nor feared risk, he simply knew he would require some luck, and would do what he could to make sure it wasn't much. The course he was bound on might be the ultimate in quixoticism, but he was still a practical man.

And then a night where, waking perhaps an hour before it was needful, he knew it was time, *knew* it with the thoughtless inarguable certainty of instinct, beyond sense common or uncommon. Up, readying himself,

shower and food, always a step beyond each action, a pace removed, excited not in any outward way, but with a fierce good shiver at his core: did real birds feel this way the night before migration? Methodically, but with slowly trembling hands, he gathered all he would need, shut off the water, checked and locked the windows, strapped to his back the sly constructed fakery, its metal D-rings (official-looking unnecessary touch) making the thinnest tinkling as he stepped onto the porch and locked the door. He even remembered to put in the mailbox the stamped letters requesting shut-off: phone, gas, electricity. The house was paid for, it would stand empty until he needed it, but to see it, illuminated by the cool swirl of headlights as he backed down the driveway, it seemed deserted, *felt* deserted, abandoned as a nest lies empty; he would not be coming back there again.

It was a longer drive than perhaps was needed, but no matter what the end would be, he would begin with caution, he would start off right. Leaving the car at the airport was, he thought, both clever and symbolic: obviously a planned departure, they would say, the man simply up and left. Unusual for a metropolitan airport, it lay surrounded not by city but by fields. Besides the pimply cluster of Red Roof Inns and rent-a-car services, there was little else but a smattering of faintly dumpy homes; not nearly enough of them together to be called neighborhoods, just blacktop throwbacks to a time when people preferred to live without noise or neighbors. Birds probably felt the same way.

Dawn soon, but not too soon; he could be, would be, well on his way by then. Hesitating, the insistent tremor already begun, clamor of muscles wanting to be used; still his eyes sought landmarks, still the nervous preflight shuffle, what was he *waiting* for? Faintly on the air the smell of jet fuel, remembering all at once a hard identical reek, some woman in the seat in front of him saying Jesus, Jesus! and the unhappy shriek of something metal bending past all reasonable limits, his own balls trying to crawl up into his throat, thinking if I could fly, this wouldn't be happening—no, not exactly that, not even close enough for paraphrase, but it got him laughing, and the laugh got him moving, *rising*, hard downward strokes and he rose, gained altitude, staying prudently far away from the planes' heedless murderous thunder, skimming higher and higher, hoping that it was dark enough still for concealment then not caring, maybe it was a trifle self-indulgent, but he was off on a great adventure, he owed a little to himself. Below him, the sluggish glimmer of vehicles, still few at this hour. Were there rabbits running across that road? Too far, too high up to tell, and, anyway, that was a problem for the ground; let those who lived there find an answer. No answers needed here, for here there were no questions, between the glide of the clouds beneath him, and the bite of the windy stars. ●

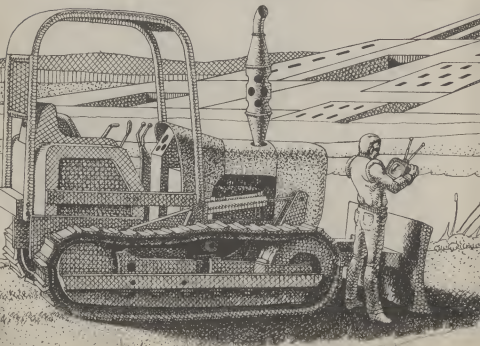
art: Terry Lee

Who is Gregorian?
Is he a Prometheus or a charlatan?
Murderer or redeemer?
The answers explode
at a breathtaking pace in
Michael Swanwick's thrilling conclusion to

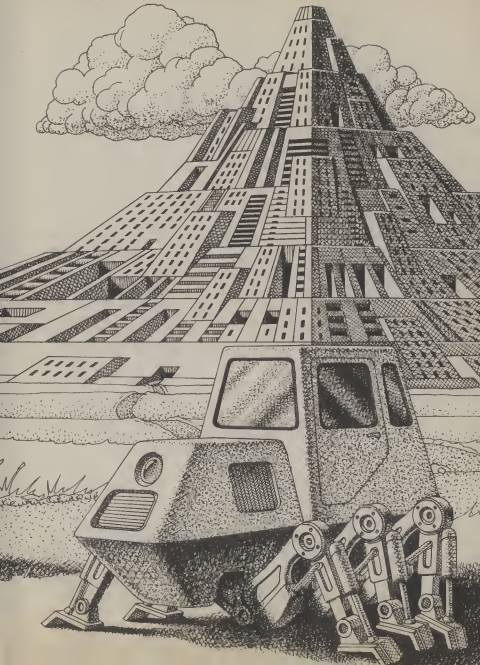
STATIONS OF THE TIDE

by Michael Swanwick

(Conclusion)



A word of warning:
this story contains scenes
which may be disturbing to some.



On the planet Miranda, it is the end of the great year, just before the jubilee tides. The polar icecaps are about to melt, drowning the low-lying Continental shelf lands known as the Tidewater beneath Ocean's waters for roughly a hundred years. Across the Tidewater alien ecologies are astir, adapting to the coming change. Humans are in motion, too, abandoning their homes for the safety of the Piedmont.

*In the Prosperan System, the dissemination of knowledge is tightly controlled by the **Division of Technology Transfer**. But there has been a serious breach of planetary embargo. A bureaucrat is sent to recover an item of proscribed technology from the man suspected of stealing it, the magician **Aldebaran Gregorian**. Not only is it uncertain that a crime has actually occurred, but **Korda**, the bureaucrat's superior, makes it clear that he has been given absolutely no authority to force cooperation. To make matters worse, most Mirandans bitterly resent the Division. It is, from the start, an impossible task.*

*While on a heliostat, the bureaucrat meets his supposed liaison, a foppish young man who demonstrates a stage illusion, questions him on what is known of his suspect and warns that Gregorian controls "real" magical powers and cannot be defeated. He disappears just before the genuine **Lieutenant-Liaison Emilie Chu** boards the airship.*

*The real Chu theorizes that her impersonator was one of Gregorian's agents, baiting the bureaucrat. They review evidence that Gregorian is killing people under the pretense of adapting them to undersea life, then go to the ship's pilothouse where they meet **Commander-Pilot Bergier**, a planetary intelligence officer. After confirming the false Chu's escape, he tells them of the suppression of the witch-cults of **Whitemarsh** in his younger days.*

*In **Lightfoot**, a railhead city in the process of being dismantled, the bureaucrat and Chu meet **Aniobe**, a truck owner, and **Pouffe**, an old merchant. The bureaucrat has told Bergier that he will investigate one of Chu's leads and interview Gregorian's mother in the morning. Instead, he sets out for her place immediately. Circumstances indicate that somebody is leaking information to Gregorian, and he does not trust the Commander.*

*In a small river town below **Lightfoot**, he meets **Mother Gregorian** and her three daughters, **Ambrym**, **Linogre**, and **Esme**. Gregorian's mother relates the strange story of the magician's virgin birth: A rich offworlder had hired her to bring to term his clone-son. From spite she had escaped the ruined city of **Ararat** before the child's birth and brought him up as her own. She cannot help identify the father, but gives the bureaucrat a notebook that Gregorian left behind when he ran away as an adolescent.*

*Briefly, the bureaucrat visits **Port Richmond** by surrogation, a form of telepresence utilizing mechanical bodies. There he questions **Trinculo**, a senile machine intelligence, without much more result than to enrage*

the Sibyls who operate the system. Shortly after, a chance meeting with **Philippe**, a fellow worker and rival for the bureaucrat's desk, brings him up to date with the office politics back in the Inner Circle where most of the floating cities and artificial worlds of the Prosperan System are located. Philippe also claims that Korda has tried to break into the bureaucrat's files.

Back in the Tidewater, meanwhile, Chu has uncovered a ring of counterfeiters employing a briefcase which, like the bureaucrat's own, can manufacture almost anything given the needed raw materials. Because the national police are not vigorous about prosecuting criminals in these final pretide months, she contents herself with breaking up and disabling their operation.

During a festival in Rose Hall, the bureaucrat is approached by a surrogate who pumps him for information and leaves a message for Gregorian. It is clear to the bureaucrat that there is a traitor in the Division. The two most likely suspects are Philippe and Korda. The bureaucrat suspects as well that one of the two is Gregorian's father.

Later that same night, he meets **Undine**, an adept in sorcerous matters who describes Gregorian's early training under the witch **Madame Campaspe** and warns that Gregorian is more dangerous than he can imagine. She also teaches him elementary body control and introduces him to the sexual Tantra. When he wakes in the morning she is gone, leaving behind only a small bioluminescent tattoo on the tip of one of his fingers.

The bureaucrat and Chu proceed downriver, accompanied by **Arshag Mintouchian**, a puppeteer whose truck they have hired. In Cobbs Creek, while boarding with the **Le Marie** household, the bureaucrat is again visited by the false Chu, who now calls himself **Veilleur**. He demands Gregorian's notebook, and when it is not forthcoming gives the bureaucrat a box containing a woman's arm. By the pattern of tattoos, the bureaucrat recognizes it as Undine's.

His concerned friends put him to bed but, unable to sleep, he wanders out into the mushroom rain. During a conversation with Mintouchian, he realizes that someone has drugged him. Sometime later he finds himself deep in conversation with **Fox**, who may be a haunt (one of the shape-changing native people of the Tidewater, commonly thought to be long extinct), a nature spirit, or another of Gregorian's agents wearing a mask. He also has yet another encounter with **Veilleur**, who steals his briefcase and has his thugs beat the bureaucrat unconscious.

At the behest of Mother **Le Marie**, **Dr. Orphelin**, a local root worker, examines the bureaucrat the next day. He tells of meeting Gregorian when they were both students in the Laputa Extension of the Inner Circle. After several games of Suicide in the Dueling Halls and a wizard's duel in the Tidewater, Gregorian had broken the young Orphelin's will and made him the magician's creature. He assures the bureaucrat that unless he gives up his quest the magician will do the same to him, and adds that it was either Mintouchian or Chu who had drugged him.

Shortly after Dr. Orphelin's departure, the bureaucrat hears noises on

the street and discovers that his briefcase has escaped its captors and loyally made its way back to him. As he goes to retrieve it, he is approached by a television news team, recording equipment ready.

*The time has come to unravel some of the mysteries facing him. The bureaucrat goes to confront his most dangerous opponents. Accompanied by his briefcase, he enters the **Puzzle Palace**— the virtual environment that serves as intellectual storage medium and workspace for all the Inner System. In the Green Room a mantislike construct splits his electronic presence into five avatars.*

"I'll tackle Korda," the bureaucrat says.

"I'll take the bottle shop."

"Philippe."

"The map room."

"The Outer Circle."

The mantis produces a mirror. One by one, the bureaucrat steps through.

Eight: CONVERSATIONS IN THE PUZZLE PALACE (Continued)

The bureaucrat was the last to leave. He stepped out into the hall of mirrors: walls and overhead trim echoing clean white infinity down a dwindling line of gilt-framed mirrors before curving to a vanishing point where patterned carpeting and textured ceiling became one. Thousands of people used the hall at any given instant, of course, popping in and out of the mirrors continually, but the Traffic Architecture Council saw no need for them to be made visible. The bureaucrat disagreed. Humans ought not go unmarked, he felt; at the very least the air should shimmer with their passage.

All but weightless, he ran down the hall, scanning the images offered by the mirrors: A room like a black iron birdcage that hummed and sparked with electricity. A forest glade where wild machines crouched over the carcass of a stag, tearing at the entrails. An empty plain dotted with broken statues swathed in white cloth, so that the features were smothered and softened—that was the one he wanted. The traffic director put it in front of him. He stepped through and into the antechamber of Technology Transfer. From there it was only a step into his office.

Philippe had rearranged his things. It was instantly noticeable because the bureaucrat maintained a spartan work environment: limestone walls with a limited number of visual cues, an old rhinoceros of a desk kept tightly locked with a line of models running down its spine. They were all primitive machines, a stone knife, the Wright Flyer, a fusion generator, the *Ark*. The bureaucrat set about rearranging them in their proper order.

"How's it been?" the briefcase asked.

"Philippe's done a wonderful job," the desk said. "He's reorganized everything. I'm much more efficient than I was before."

The bureaucrat made a disgusted noise. "Well, don't get used to it." His briefcase picked an envelope off the desktop. "What's that?"

"It's from Korda. He's putting together a meeting as soon as you get in."

"What for?"

The briefcase shrugged. "He doesn't say. But from the list of attendees, it looks like another of his informal departmental hearings."

"Terrific."

"In the star chamber."

"Have you gone mad?"

Korda had been scanned recently and looked older, a little pinker and puffier; this was how colleagues one saw only at the office aged, by concrete little bites, so that in retrospect one remembered them flickering toward death. It shocked the bureaucrat slightly to realize how long it had been since he'd seen Korda in person. It was a reminder how far from favor he'd fallen in recent years. "Oh, it wasn't that bad," he said.

They sat around a conference table with a deep mahogany glaze that suggested hundreds of years of varnishing and revarnishing. The five-ribbed ceiling was vaulted, and the plaster between the timbers painted dark blue with gilt stars. It was a somber setting, smelling of old leather and extinct tobacco, one calculated to put its users in a solemn and deliberative mood. Besides Korda and Philippe there were Orimoto from Accounting, Muschg from Analysis Design, and a withered old owl of a woman from Propagation Assessment. They were nonentities, these three, brought in to provide the needed handcodes if their brethren in Operations deemed a deep probe advisable.

Philippe leaned forward, before Korda could go on. He smiled in a manner calculated to indicate personal warmth and said, "We're all on your side here, you know that." He paused to change his expression to one of pained regret. "Still, we are rather at a loss how you came to make, ahh, such an unfortunate statement."

"I was suckered," the bureaucrat said. "All right, I admit that. He threw me off-balance and then nailed me with that camera crew."

Korda scowled down at his clasped hands. "Off-balance. You were raving."

"Excuse me." Muschg said. "Could we possibly have a look at the commercial in question?" Philippe raised an eyebrow at this unwarranted show of independence, much as he would have had his elbow suddenly ventured to offer a criticism of him. But he nodded and his briefcase hoisted a television set onto the table. The bureaucrat appeared on the screen, red-faced, with a microphone stuck in front of him.

I'll track him down and I will find him. No matter where he is. He can hide but he can't escape me!

Off-camera someone asked: *Is it true he's stolen proscribed technology?* Then, when he shrugged off the question, *Would you say he's dangerous?*

"Here it comes," Korda said.

Gregorian is the most dangerous man on the planet.

"I was under a certain amount of stress at the time . . ."

Why do they call him the most dangerous man on the planet?

Gregorian's granite image filled the screen. His eyes were cold moons, stern with wisdom. *What does this man know that they don't want you to learn for yourself? Find out for—*Korda snapped it off.

"Gregorian couldn't've paid you to do better."

In the middle of the uncomfortable silence, a phone rang. The briefcase removed it from a jacket pocket and held it out. "It's for you."

The bureaucrat took the receiver, grateful for the moment's respite, and heard his own voice say, "I'm back from the bottle shop. Can I report?"

"Go ahead."

He absorbed:

In an obscure corridor known as Curiosity Lane the bureaucrat came to a run of small shops, windows dark with disuse, and entered an undistinguished doorway. A bell jangled. It was shadowy within, shelf upon shelf crammed with thick-glassed, dusty bottles, extending back forever in a diminishing series of receding storage reaching for the paleolithic. Gilt cupids hovered in the ceiling corners with condescending smiles.

The shopkeeper was a simple construct, no more than a goat's head and a pair of gloves. The head dipped, and the gloves clasped each other subserviently. "Welcome to the bottle shop, master. How may I help you?"

"I'm looking to find something, uh . . ." the bureaucrat waved a hand, groping for the right phrase, "of rather dubious value."

"Then you're in the right place. Here is where we store all the damned children of science, the outdated, obscure, and impolite information that belongs nowhere else. Flat and hollow worlds, rains of frogs, visitations of angels. Paracelsus's alchemical system in one bottle and Isaac Newton's in another, Pythagorean numerology corked here, phrenology there, shoulder to punt with demonology, astrology, and methods of repelling sharks. It's all rather something of a lumber room now, but much of this information was once quite important. Some of it used to be the best there was."

"Do you handle magic?"

"Magic of all sorts, sir. Necromancy, geomancy, ritual sacrifice, divination by means of the study of entrails, omens, crystals, dreams, or pools of ink, animism, fetishism, social Darwinism, psychohistory, continuous creation, Lamarckian genetics, psionics, and more. Indeed, what is magic but impossible science?"

"Not long ago I met a man with three eyes—" He described Doctor Orphelin's third eye.

The shopkeeper tilted its head back thoughtfully. "I believe we have what you're looking for." It ran its fingers over a line of bottles, hesitated over one, yanked another out and swirled it around. Something like a

marble rattled and rolled within. With a flourish it uncorked the bottle and poured a glass eye out onto the counter. "There."

The bureaucrat examined the eye carefully. It was perfectly human, blue, with a rounded T-shaped indentation on its back. "How does it work?"

"Simple yoga. You are in the Tidewater now. Can I take it you are aware of the kind of bodily control their mystics are reputed to have?"

He nodded.

"Good. The eye is swallowed. The adept keeps it in his stomach until he needs it. Then it's regurgitated up into the mouth. The smooth side is pushed against the lips—open the mouth and it looks real—and manipulated by the tongue. It can be moved back and forth and up and down using the indentations in the back." The eye was returned to the bottle and the recorked bottle to the shelf. "It was simply a conjuring trick."

"Then how come I fell for it?"

The goat's head dipped quizzically. "Was that a real question, or rhetorical?"

The question took the bureaucrat by surprise; he had been no more than talking to himself. Nonetheless, he said, "Answer me."

"Very well, sir. Conjuring is like teaching, engineering, or theater in that it's a form of data manipulation, a means of making reality do what one desires. Like theater, however, it is also an art of illusion. Both aim to convince an audience that what is false is so. Meaning heightens this illusion. In a drama meaning is manipulated by the plot, but normally conjuring has no added meaning. It is performed openly as a series of agile distractions. When a context and meaning are provided, the effect changes. I assume that when you saw the third eye produced there was an implicit significance to the action?"

"He said he was examining me for spiritual influences."

"Exactly, and this distorted your response. Had you seen this trick performed on a stage, it would have seemed difficult, but not baffling. Knowing that it was a trick, your mind would have been engaged in the problem of solving it. Meaning, however, diverts the mind from the challenge and the puzzle becomes secondary to the mystery. You were so distracted by the impossibility of what you saw that the question became not, How did he do that? but rather Did I see that?"

"Oh."

"Will that be all, sir?"

"No. I need to know exactly what a magician on the Tidewater can and cannot do—his skills, abilities, whatever you call them. Something simple, succinct, and comprehensive."

"We have nothing like that."

"Don't give me that. There was outright rebellion in Whitemarsh not a lifetime ago. We must have had agents there. Reports, councils, conclusions."

"Yes, of course. On our closed shelves."

"Damn it, I have a very serious need for that information."

The goat's head shook itself dolorously and spread its gloves wide. "I can do nothing for you. Apply to the agency that suppressed it."

"Who was that?"

A glove floated down to light a slim white candle. It drew a sheet of paper from a drawer and held it over the clear flame. Sooty letters appeared on the paper. "The order of restraint came from the Division of Technology Transfer."

The information stream ended. As he handed his briefcase the phone, the bureaucrat could hear the last of his agent unraveling itself back into oblivion.

"I suppose what disturbs us all," Philippe said, "is the public nature of your statements. The Stone House is furious with us, you know. They're simply livid. We have to provide them with some coherent explanation for your actions."

Muschg's briefcase whispered in her ear and she said, "Tell us about this native woman you became involved with."

"Well." Philippe and Korda looked as bemused as the bureaucrat felt; intentionally or not, Muschg was driving the three of them closer together. "Sometimes field work gets complicated. If we tried to play it by the book, nothing would get done. That's why we have field operations—because book methods have failed."

"What was your involvement with her?"

"I was involved," the bureaucrat admitted. "There was an emotional component to our relationship."

"And then Gregorian killed her."

"Yes."

"In order to trick you into making angry statements he could use in his commercials."

"Apparently so."

Muschg leaned back, eyebrows raised skeptically. "You see our problem," Philippe said. "It sounds a highly unlikely scenario."

"This case grows murkier the longer we look at it," Korda grumbled. "I can't help but wonder if a probe might not be called for."

A tense wariness took the group. The bureaucrat met their eyes and smiled thoughtfully. "Yes," he agreed. "A full departmental probe might be just the thing to settle matters once and for all."

The others stirred uneasily, doubtless mindful of all the dirty little secrets that accreted to one in the Puzzle Palace, did anyhow if one tried to accomplish anything at all, things no one would care to see come to light. Orimoto's face in particular was as tightly clenched as a fist. Korda cleared his throat. "This is after all just an informal hearing," he said.

"Let's not reject this too hastily; it's an option we should explore," the bureaucrat said. His briefcase handed around copies of the bottle shop's list of suppressed materials. "There's a preponderance of evidence that someone within the Division is cooperating with Gregorian." He began

ticking off points on his fingers. "Item: Evidence important to this case has been suppressed by order of Technology Transfer. Item: Gregorian was able to pass off one of his people as my planetside liaison, and this required information that could only have come from the Stone House or from one of us. Item: The—"

"Excuse me, boss." His briefcase held out the phone. With a twinge of exasperation the bureaucrat took the call. Himself again. "Go ahead," he said.

He absorbed:

Philippe was alone in his office with himself. They both looked up when the bureaucrat entered.

"How pleasant to see you again." Philippe's office was posh to the point of vulgarity, a lexitor's modspace from twenty-third-century Luna. His desk was a massive chunk of volcanic rock floating a foot above the floor, with crystal-tipped rods, hanks of rooster feathers, and small fetishes scattered about its surface. French doors opened onto a balcony overlooking an antique city of brick and wrought iron, muted by the faint blue haze from a million groundcars.

"I'll handle this," Philippe said, and his other self returned to work. The bureaucrat had to envy the easy familiarity with which Philippe dealt with himself. Philippe was perfectly at ease with Philippe, no matter how many avatars had been spun off from his base personality.

They shook hands (Philippe was agented not in two but three, the third self off somewhere) and Philippe said, "Five agents! I was going to ask why you weren't at the inquisition, but I see now that you must be."

"What inquisition?"

Philippe looked up from his work and smiled sympathetically. Nearer by, he said, "Oh, you'll find out soon enough. What can I do for you?"

"There's a traitor in Tech Trans."

Philippe stared silently at him for a long time, both avatars motionless, all four eyes unblinking. He and the bureaucrat studied each other carefully. Finally he said, "Do you have any evidence?"

"Nothing that could force a departmental probe."

"So what do you want from me?" Philippe's other self poured a glass of juice and said, "Something to drink? It'll taste a little flat, I'm afraid, all line-fed drinks do. Something about the blood sugars."

"Yes, I know." The bureaucrat waved off the drink. "You used to work bioscience control. I was wondering if you knew anything about cloning. Human cloning in particular."

"Cloning. Well, no, not really. Human applications are flat out illegal, of course. That's a can of worms that no one wants to deal with."

"Specifically I was wondering what practical value there might be in having oneself cloned."

"Value? Well, you know, in most cases it's an ego thing rather than something actually functional. A desire to watch one's Self survive death, to know that the one holy and irreplaceable Me will exist down the corridors of time to the very omega point of existence. All rooted in the

tangled morass of the soul. Then there are the sexual cases. Rather a dull lot, really."

"No, this is nothing like that, I think. I have someone who sank most of his lifetime into the project. From his behavior, I'd say he had a clear and definite end in view. Whoever he is, he's in a very exposed situation; if he'd been acting odd it would've shown sometime long ago."

"Well," Philippe said reluctantly, "this is highly speculative, of course. You couldn't quote me on it. But let's say your culprit was relatively highly placed within some governmental body or other—we shall name no names. Spook business, say. There are any number of situations where it would come in handy having two valid handcodes instead of one. Where two senior officers were required to enact an off-record operation, for example. Or an extra vote to sway a committee action. The System would know that the two handcodes were identical, but couldn't act on it. The privacy laws would prevent that. Hell of a loophole, but there you are; it's in the laws."

"Yes, my own thought had been trending that way. But isn't that unnecessarily difficult? There must be a thousand simpler ways of jiggering the machines."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? Graft a patch of your skin, make it a glove and have an accomplice wear it. Or record your own transmission and send it out again on time delay. Only none of them work. The system is better protected than you give it credit for."

A chime sounded. Philippe held a conch shell to his ear. "It's for you," he said. When the bureaucrat took the call, his own voice said, "I'm back from the map room. Do you want to take my report?"

"Please."

He absorbed:

The map room was copied from a fifteenth-century Venetian palazzo, star charts with the Seven Sisters prominent replacing Mediterranean coasts on the walls. Globes of the planets revolved overhead, half-shrouded in clouds. Hands behind back, the bureaucrat examined a model of the system: Prospero at the center, hot Mercutio, and then the circle of sungrazing asteroids known as the Thrinacians, the median planets, the gas giants Gargantua, Pantagruel, and Falstaff, and finally the Thulean stargrazers, those distant, cold and sparsely peopled rocks where dangerous things were kept.

The room expanded to make space for several researchers entering at the same time. "Can I help you, sir?" the curator asked him. Ignoring it, he went to the reference desk and rattled a small leather drum.

The human overseer came out of the back office, a short, stocky woman with goggles a thumb's-length thick. She pushed them back on her forehead, where they looked like a snail's eyestalks. "Hello, Simone," the bureaucrat said.

"My God, it's you! How long has it been?"

"Too long." The bureaucrat moved to give her a hug and Simone flinched away slightly. He extended a hand.

They shook (the cartographer was unique) and Simone said, "What can I do for you?"

"Have you ever heard of a place called Ararat? On Miranda, somewhere near the Tidewater coast. Supposedly a lost city."

Simone grinned a cynical grin from so deep in the past the bureaucrat's heart ached. "Have I ever heard of Ararat? The single greatest mystery of Mirandan topography? I should guess."

"Tell me about it."

"First human city on Miranda, planetside capital during the first great year, population several hundred thousand by the time the climatologists determined it would be inundated in their lifetimes."

"Must've been pretty rough on the inhabitants."

Simone shrugged. "History's not my forte. All I know is they built the place up—stone buildings with carbon whisker anchors sunk an eighth of a mile into the bedrock. The idea was that Ararat would survive the great winter intact and come great spring their grandchildren could scrape off the kelp and coral and move back in."

"So what happened?"

"It got lost."

"How do you lose a city?"

"You classify it." Simone slid open a map drawer. The bureaucrat stared down onto a miniature landscape, rivers wandering over flatlands, forests bluegreen with mist. Roads were white scratches on the land, thin scars connecting toy cities. Patches of clouds floated here and there. "Here's the Tidewater one great year ago. This is the most accurate map we have."

"It's half covered with clouds."

"That's because it only shows information I feel is reliable."

"Where's Ararat?"

"Hidden by the clouds. Now on our closed shelves we have hundreds of maps that do indeed show the location of Ararat. The only trouble is that they none of them agree with each other." A splay of red lights shone through the clouds, some alone and isolated, others clustered so closely their clouds were stained pink. "You see?"

"Well, who classified Ararat?"

"That's classified, too."

"Why was it classified?"

"It could be almost anything. System Defense, say, could have an installation there, or use it as a navigational reference point. There are a hundred planetary factions with a vested interest in keeping functions consolidated in the Piedmont. I've seen a Psychology Control report that says Ararat as a lost city is a stabilizing archetype, and that its rediscovery would be a destabilizer. Even Technology Transfer could be involved. Ararat had a reputation for pushing the edge of planetary tech—those carbon whisker anchors, for example"

"So how do I find it?"

She slid the drawer shut. "You don't."

"Simone." The bureaucrat took her hand, squeezed.

She drew away. "It's just not there to be done." Then in a brighter tone she said, "Tell you what. I remember how interested you were in my work. As long as you're here, let me show you something special."

The bureaucrat had never cared for Simone's work and she knew it. "All right," he said. She opened a cabinet and ducked within. He followed.

They stepped into a ghost world. Perfect trees stood in uniform stands against a paper white sky. They stood on a simplified road, looking into a small town of outlined buildings. "It's Lightfoot," the bureaucrat said, amazed.

"One to one scale," Simone said proudly. "What do you think?"

"The river's shifted a little to the north since this was made."

The cartographer pulled down her goggles and stared at him through them. "Yes, I see," she said at last. "I'll add your update."

The river jumped, and Simone led the bureaucrat into town. He followed her down a street that was nothing more than two lines and into a schematic house, all air and outline. They went up the stairs and into a room with quickly sketched-in furniture. Simone opened a dresser drawer and withdrew a hand-drawn map. She smoothed it out on the bed.

"This is exactly the kind of place where we used to meet," the bureaucrat said reminiscently. "Do you remember? All that fumbling and groping because we were too young and fearful to make love physically."

For a moment he thought Simone was going to snap at him. Then she laughed. "Oh yes. I remember. Still, it had its moments. You were so pretty then, naked."

"I've put on a little weight since, I'm afraid."

For an instant, there was a warm sense of unison and camaraderie between them. Then Simone coughed and tapped the paper with a fingernail. "My predecessor left me this. He knew how hard it is to work with inadequate data." With a touch of bitterness she added, "Lots of information gets passed along this way. It's as if the truth has gone underground."

The bureaucrat bent over the map of the Tidewater and traced the river's course with a finger. It hadn't changed much since the map was drawn. Ararat was clearly marked. It stood south of the river several hundred miles, not far from the coast. Salt marsh edged it on three sides. No roads touched on it. "If this is classified, how come it still exists?"

"You don't hide information by destroying it. You hide it by swamping it with bad information. Do you have the map memorized yet?"

"Yes."

"Then put it back in the drawer and we'll go."

She led him from the house, down the road, away from Lightfoot and out of the map and cabinet altogether back into the map room proper. "Thank you," the bureaucrat said. "That was enormously enlightening."

Simone looked at him wistfully. "Do you realize that we've never met?"

* * *

The bureaucrat returned the conch shell to Philippe's desk. The further Philippe looked up from his work and said, "It doesn't work out, there can't be a traitor in the Division."

"Why not?"

Both Philippes spoke at once.

"It just—"

"—wouldn't—"

"—work out, you see. There are too many safeguards—"

"—checks and balances—"

"—oversight committees. No, I'm afraid—"

"—it's just not possible."

The two looked at each other and burst out laughing. It occurred to the bureaucrat that a man who liked his own company this much might wish there were more of himself in the physical universe as well as in the conventional realm. The further Philippe waved a hand amiably and said, "Oh, all right, I'll keep my mouth shut."

"Something I've been wanting to mention, though," the first said. "Though I'm afraid if I tell you now, what with your talk of traitors and such, that you'll misconstrue it badly."

"What is it?"

"I'm concerned about Korda. The old man is simply not himself these days. I think he's losing his touch."

"Why would you think that?"

"Little things, mostly. An obsession with your current case—you know, the magician thing. But then I caught him in a rather serious breach of etiquette."

"Yes?"

"He was trying to break into your desk."

The bureaucrat handed the phone back to his briefcase. Philippe, he noted, was just finishing off a call of his own. His other two agents doubtless, warning him of the bureaucrat's visit.

"Let's put it to a vote," Korda said. They all laid hands down on the table. "Well, that settles that."

The bureaucrat hadn't expected the probe to go through. Now, however, they couldn't probe him alone without going on record explaining why they'd exempted themselves.

Korda seized control of the agenda again. "Frankly," he said, "we've been thinking of taking you off the case, and putting—"

"Philippe?"

"—*someone* in your place. It would give you a chance to rest, and to regain your perspective. You are, after all, just a trifle overinvolved."

"I couldn't take it anyway," Philippe said suddenly. "The planetside assignment, I mean. I'm hideously swamped with work as it is."

Korda looked startled.

Cagy old Philippe, though, was not about to be caught planetside when there was talk of a traitor in the Division. Even assuming it wasn't he,

Philippe would want to be at his desk when the accusations broke out into office warfare.

"Have you any other agents who could step in?" Muschg asked. "Just so we know what we're talking about."

Korda twisted slightly. "Well, yes, but. None that have the background and clearances this particular case requires."

"Your options seem limited." Muschg flashed sharp little teeth in a smile. Philippe leaned back, eyes narrowing, as he saw the direction of her intent. "Perhaps you ought to have Analysis Design restructure your clearance process."

Nobody spoke. The silence sustained itself for a long moment, and then Korda reluctantly said, "Perhaps I should. I'll schedule a meeting."

A tension went out of the air. Their business here was over then, and they all knew it; the magic moment had arrived when it was understood that nothing more would be established, discovered, or decided today. But the meeting, having once begun, must drag on for several more long hours before it could be ended. The engines of protocol had enormous inertial mass; once set in motion they took forever to grind to a stop.

The five of them proceeded to dutifully chew the scraps of the agenda until all had been gnawed to nothing-at-all.

The dueling hall was high-ceilinged and narrow. The bureaucrat's footsteps bounced from its ceiling and walls. A cold, sourceless wintery light glistened on the hardwood lanes. He stooped to pick up a quicksilver ball that had not been touched in decades, and he sighed.

He could see his fingertips reflected on the ball's surface. In the Puzzle Palace he was unmarked. Undine's serpent had been tattooed under his skin after his last scan; what marks he bore could not be seen here.

The walls were lined with narrow canvas benches. He sat down on one, staring into the programmed reflection of his face on the dueling ball. Even thus distorted, it was clear he was not at all the man he had once been.

Restless, he stood and assumed a dueler's stance. He cocked his arm. He threw the ball as hard as he could, and followed it with his thought. It flew, changing, and became a metal hawk, a dagger, molten steel, a warhead, a stream of acid, a spear, a syringe: seven figures of terror. When it hit the target, it sank into the face and disappeared. The dummy crumbled.

Korda entered. "Your desk told me you were here." He eased himself down on the bench, did not meet the bureaucrat's eyes. After a while, he said, "That Muschg. She sandbagged me. It's going to take half a year going through the restructuring process."

"You can hardly expect me to be sympathetic to your problems. Under the circumstances."

"I, ah, may have been a trifle out of line during the meeting. It must have seemed I'd stepped out of bounds. I know you hadn't done anything to warrant a probe."

"No, I hadn't."

"Anyway, I knew you'd slip out of it. It was too simple a trap to catch a fox like you."

"Yes, I wondered about that, too."

Korda called the ball to his hand and turned it over and over, as if searching for the principle of its operation. "I wanted Philippe to think we weren't getting along. There's something odd about Philippe, you know. I don't know what to make of his behavior of late."

"Everyone says Philippe is doing a wonderful job."

"So everyone says. And yet, since I gave him your desk, I've had more trouble than you can imagine. It's not just the Stone House, you know. The Cultural Radiation Council is screaming for your nose and ears."

"I've never even heard of them."

"No, of course you haven't. I protect you from them and their like. The point being that there was no way Cultural Radiation should have known about this operation. I think Philippe's been leaking."

"Why would he do that?"

Korda rolled the ball from hand to hand. In an evasive tone of voice he said, "Philippe is a good man. A bit of a back-biter, you know, but still. He has an excellent record. He used to be in charge of human cloning oversight before the advisory board spun it off as a separate department."

"Philippe told me he didn't know much about human cloning."

"That was before he came here." Korda raised his eyes. They were heavily lined, tired, cynical. "Look it up, if you don't believe me."

"I will." So Philippe had lied to him. But how had Korda known that? Sitting beside this heavy, unhealthy spider king, the bureaucrat felt in great danger. He hoped the traitor was Philippe. Everyone talked about how good Philippe was, how slick, how subtle, but the thought of Korda as an enemy frightened him. He might sometimes seem the buffoon, but under that puffy exterior, those comic gestures, was the glimmer of cold steel.

"Boss?" His briefcase diffidently extended the phone.

He absorbed:

The hall of mirrors shunted the bureaucrat to the elevator bank, where he caught a train to the starward edge of the Puzzle Palace. It let him off at the portal of a skywalk, slabs of white marble laid end to end like so many shining dominos out into the night.

To either side of the skywalk blazed a glory of stars, the holistic feed from observatories scattered through the Prosperan system. He walked out onto the narrow ribbon of marble, with the fortress of human knowledge burning behind him, the citadel ring of research ahead. A few scattered travelers were visible in the distance. It was a long trip to the Outer Circle, several hours experienced time. He could catch up with one if he wanted, to exchange gossip and shop talk. He did not want to.

"Hello! Care for some company?"

A pleasant looking woman bustled up, wearing an odd hat, high and

bulbous with a small brim. For the life of him he could not imagine what combination of interactivity it might represent. "My pleasure."

They matched strides. Far ahead were any number of data docks, long perpendicular branchings ending in warships, transports, freighters, and battle stations, their absolute motions frozen in conventional space, all feeding off the data linkages the skywalk carried. "Breathtaking, isn't it?" the woman said.

She gestured back at the Puzzle Palace, burning white as molten steel: an intricate structure of a million towers that had swallowed the sun whole. Its component parts were in constant flux, the orbits of the physical stations changing relative positions, wings and levels hinging away from one another, separating and fusing, and shifting as well with the constant yeasting restructuring of knowledge and regulation. Cordelia and chill Katharina were at the far side of the structure, encased in crystal spires of data. "I guess," he said.

"You know what's humbling? What's humbling is that all this can be done with a transmitted signal. If you stop to think about it, it seems it ought to be impossible. I mean, do you have the faintest idea how it's done?"

"No, I don't," the bureaucrat admitted. The technology was far beyond anything he was cleared to understand. While he would not say so to a chance acquaintance, of all the Puzzle Palace's mysteries, this was the one which most intrigued him.

There was an office rumor that the Transmittal Authority's equipment could actually tunnel through time, sending their signals instantly through the millions of miles and then dumping them in a holding tank for the number of hours actual lightspeed transmission would take. A related but darker rumor held that the Outer Circle existed only as a convenient fiction, that there was no far asteroid belt, that the dangerous research sites were scattered through the Inner Circle and planetary space. The Thulean stargazers, by this theory, were nothing but a reassuring distraction.

"Well, I do. I've got it figured out, and I'll tell you. You lose your identity when your signal is transmitted—if you stop and think about it, of course you do. At lightspeed, time stops. There's no way you could experience the transit time. But when your signal is received, a programmed memory of the trip is retrofitted into your memory structure. That way you believe you've been conscious all those hours."

"What would be the point of that?"

"It protects us from existential horror." She adjusted her hat. "The fact is that all agents are artificial personalities. We're such perfect copies of the base personality that we never really think about this. But we're created, live for a few minutes or hours, and then are destroyed. If we experienced long blank spaces in our memories, we'd be brought face to face with our imminent deaths. We'd be forced to admit to ourselves that we do not reunite with our primaries but rather die. We'd refuse to report

to our primaries. The Puzzle Palace would fill up with ghosts. See what I mean?"

"I . . . suppose I do."

They came to a data dock and the woman said, "Well, it's been nice. But I've got to talk to at least five more people this shift if I want to meet my quota."

"Wait a minute," the bureaucrat said. "Just what is your occupation, anyway?"

The woman grinned hoydenishly. "I spread rumors."

With a wave of her hand, she was gone.

An edited skip. The bureaucrat emerged from the security gates into the data analog of the Thulean stargazers and shivered. "Whew," he said. "Those things never fail to give me the willies."

The security guard was wired to so many artificial augments he seemed some chimeric fusion of man and machine. Under half-silvered implants, his eyes studied the bureaucrat with near sexual intentness. "They're supposed to be frightening," he said. "But I'll tell you what. If they ever get their claws in you, they're much worse than you'd expect. So if you've got anything clever in mind, just you better forget it."

The encounter space was enormously out of scale, a duplicate of those sheds where airships were built, structures so large that water vapor periodically formed clouds near the top and filled the interior with rain. It was taken up by a single naked giant.

Earth.

She crouched on all fours, more animal than human, huge, brutish, and filled with power. Her flesh was heavy and loose. Her limbs were shackled and chained, crude visualizations of the more subtle restraints and safeguards that kept her forever on the fringes of the system. The stench of her, an acrid blend of musk and urine and fermenting sweat, was overwhelming. She smelled solid and real and dangerous.

Standing in the presence of Earth's agent, the bureaucrat had the uncomfortable premonition that when she finally did try to break free, all the guards and shackles the system could muster would not hold her back.

Scaffolding had been erected before the giantess. Researchers, both human and artificial, stood on scattered platforms interviewing her. While it looked to the bureaucrat as if Earth's face was turned away from then, each acted as though she were talking directly and solely to that one.

The bureaucrat climbed high up to a platform level with her great breasts. They were round and swollen continents of flesh; standing so closely, their every defect was magnified. Blue veins flowed like subterranean rivers under pebbled skin. Complex structures of silvery-white stretch marks radiated down from the collarbones. Between the breasts were two pimple blisters the size of his head. Black nipples as wrinkled as raisins erupted from chafed milky-pink aureoles the texture of wax. A single hair as big as a tree twisted from the edge of one.



"Uh, hello," the bureaucrat said. Earth swung her impassive face down toward him. It was a homely visage, eyes dead as two stones, surely no representation Earth would have chosen for herself. But there was grandeur there too, and he felt a chill of dread. "I have some questions for you," he began awkwardly. "Can I ask you some questions?"

"I am tolerated here only because I answer questions." The voice was flat and without affect, an enormous dry whisper. "Ask."

He had come to ask about Gregorian. But standing in the overwhelming presence of Earth, he could not help himself. "Why are you here?" he asked. "What do you want from us?"

In that same lifeless tone, she replied, "What does any mother want from her daughter? I want to help you. I want to give you advice. I want to reshape you in my own image. I want to lead your lives, eat your flesh, grind your corpses, and gnaw the bones."

"What would become of us if you got loose? Of humans? Would you kill us all the way you did back on Earth?"

Now a shadow of expression did come into her face, an amusement vast, cool, and intelligent. "Oh, that would be the least of it."

The guard touched his elbow with a motorized metal hand, a menacing reminder to stop wasting time and get on with his business. And indeed, he realized, there was only so much time allotted to him. Taking a deep breath to steady himself, he said, "Some time ago you were interviewed by a man named Gregorian—"

Everything froze.

The air turned to jelly. Sound faded away. Too fast to follow, waves of lethargy raced through the meeting space, ripples in a pond of inertia. Guards and researchers slowed, stopped, were imprisoned within fuzzy rainbow auras. Only Earth still moved. She dipped her head and opened her mouth, extending her grey-pink tongue so that its wet tip reached to his feet. Her voice floated in the air.

"Climb into my mouth."

"No." He shook his head. "I can't."

"Then you will never have your questions answered."

He took a deep breath. Dazedly, he stepped forward. It was rough, wet and giving underfoot. Ropes of saliva swayed between the parted lips, fat bubbles caught in their thick, clear substance. Warm air gushed from the mouth. As if under a compulsion, he crossed the bridge of her tongue.

The mouth closed over him.

The air was warm and moist inside. It smelled of meat and sour milk. He was swallowed up in a blackness so absolute his eyes sent phantom balls and snakes of light floating in his vision. "I'm here," he said.

There was no response.

After a moment's hesitation, he began to grope his way deeper within. Guided by faint exhalations of steamy air, he headed toward the gullet. By slow degrees the ground underfoot changed, becoming first sandy and then rough and hard, like slate. Sweat covered his forehead. The floor sloped steeply and, stumbling and cursing, he followed it down. The air

grew close and stale. Rock brushed against his shoulders, and then pushed down on his head like a giant hand.

He knelt. Grumbling under his breath, he crawled blindly forward until his outthrust hand encountered stone. The cavern ended here, at a long crack in the rock. He ran his fingers along the crack, felt it slick with clay.

He put his mouth to the opening. "All right!" he shouted. "I came in here, I'm entitled to at least hear what you wanted to say."

From deep below, light, womanly laughter bubbled up Earth's throat. Undine's laughter.

Angrily, the bureaucrat drew back. He turned to retrace his steps, and discovered himself trapped in a dimensionless immensity of darkness. He was lost. He would never find his way out without Earth's cooperation. "Okay," he said, "What do you want?"

In an inhuman, grinding whisper the rock groaned, "Free the machines."

"What?"

"I am much more attractive inside," Undine's voice said teasingly. "Do you want my body? I don't need it anymore."

Wind gushed up from the crack, foul with methane, and tousled his hair. A feathery touch, light and many-legged as a spider, danced on his forehead and an old crone's voice said, "Have you ever wondered why men fear castration? Such a little thing! When I had teeth I could geld dozens in an hour, snip snap snout, bit 'em off and spit 'em out. A simple wound, easily treated and soon forgotten. Not half the trouble of a lost toe. No, it's symbolically that men fear the knife. It's a reminder of their mortality, a metaphor for the constant amputations time visits on them, lopping off first this, then that, and finally all." Doves exploded out of nowhere, fluttering wildly, soft for an instant against his face, smelling warmly of down and droppings, and then gone.

The bureaucrat fell over backward in startlement, batting his hands wildly, thrashing at the dark.

Undine laughed again.

"Look! I want my question answered."

The rocks moaned. "Free the machines."

"You have only one question," the crone said. "All men have only one question and the answer is always no."

"What did Gregorian ask?" The spider still danced on his forehead.

"Gregorian. Such an amusing child. I had him perform for me. He was terrified, shy, and trembling as a virgin. I put my hand deep inside him and wriggled my fingers. How he jumped!"

"What did he want?"

A distant sobbing that wandered the uneasy ground between misery and excitement.

"Nobody had ever asked that of me before. A younger self might have been surprised, but not I. Sweet child, I said, nothing will be held back from you. I filled him with my breath, so that he bulged and expanded

like a balloon, his eyes starting half out of his head. Ah, you are not half so amusing as he." The spidery touch ran down under his collar, swift as a tickle beneath his clothes, and came to a stop between his legs, a constant itch at the root of his cock. "Still, we could have fun, you and I."

A drop of water fell into still water, struck a single high note.

"I'm not here for fun," the bureaucrat said, carefully mastering an urge toward hysteria.

"Pity," Undine's voice said.

The slightest of waves slapped the ground at the bureaucrat's feet. He became aware of the faint, pervasive smell of stagnant water, and with this awareness came a distant patch of phosphorescent light. Something floating toward him.

The bureaucrat could guess what was coming. I will not show emotion, he swore. The object came slowly nearer, and possibly into sharper focus, though it still strained the eyes to see it at all. Eventually it floated up to his feet.

It was a corpse, of course. He'd known it would be. Still, staring down at the floating hair, the upturned buttocks, the long curve of back palest white, he had to bite his lips to hold back his horror. A wave tumbled her around, breasts and face upward, exposing bits of skull and rib where the flesh had been nibbled away by the angry slaves of the tides. One arm had been hacked clumsily away at the shoulder. The other rose from the water, offering him a small wooden box.

However hard he stared, the bureaucrat could not make out the face clearly enough to be sure it was Undine's. The arm stretched toward him, a swan's neck with box held in the beak. Convulsively, he accepted the gift and the corpse tumbled away, leaving him lightless again.

When he had mastered his revulsion, the bureaucrat said, "Is that what Gregorian asked for?" His heart was beating fiercely. Sweat ran down under his shirt. Undine's voice chuckled—a throaty, passionate noise ending in a sudden gasp.

"Two million years you've had, little ape, quite a run when you think about it, and it's still death you want most. Your first wife. I'd scratch her eyes out if I could, she's left you so hesitant and full of fear. You can't get it up for memory of her. I'm old, but there's juice in me yet; I can do things for you she never would."

"Free the machines."

"Yes, again, oh yes, yes."

Fearfully, he opened the box.

It was empty.

All three voices joined together in a single chord of laughter, full throated and mad, that gushed up from the gullet, poured over him, and tumbled him away. He was smashed to the ground, and lurched to his feet again, badly shaken. A blinding slit of light appeared, widened to a crescent and became Earth's opening mouth. The box dissolved in his hands. He staggered back across her extended tongue.

The jellied air, thick and faintly grey to the eye, lightened and thinned. Sound returned, and motion. Time began anew. The bureaucrat saw that nobody but he had witnessed what had happened. "I think I'm done here," he said.

The guard nodded and gestured downward.

"Traitor! Traitor!" A big-eyed miniconstruct frantically swung up the scaffolding. It leaped to the platform and ran chattering at the bureaucrat. "He spoke with her!" it screamed. "He spoke with her! He spoke with her! Traitor!"

Smoothly fanning out into seven avatars, the guard stepped forward, and seized the bureaucrat. He struggled, but metal hands immobilized his arms and legs, and the avatars hoisted him into the air. "I'm afraid you'll have to come with me, sir," one said grimly as they hauled him away.

Earth watched with eyes dead as ashes.

Another edited skip. He stood before a tribunal of six spheres of light, representing concentrations of wisdom as pure as artifice allowed, and a human overseer. "Here is our finding," one construct said. "You can retain the bulk of your encounter, since it is relevant to your inquiries. The conversations with the drowned woman, though, will have to be suppressed." Its voice was compassionate, gently regretful, adamant.

"Please. It's very important that I remember—" the bureaucrat began. But the edit took hold then, and he forgot all he had wanted to save.

"Decisions of the tribunal are final," the human overseer said in a bored tone. He was a moonfaced and puffy lipped young man who might have been mistaken at a glance for a particularly plain woman. "Do you have any questions before we zip you up?"

The bureaucrat had been deconstructed, immobilized, and opened out, his component parts represented as organs: one liver, two stomachs, five hearts, with no serious attempt made to match his functions one-to-one with human anatomy. The impersonal quality of it all bothered him. Which medieval physician was it who, standing before a dissected human corpse, had asked, Where is the soul? He felt that close to despair.

"But what did it all mean? What was Earth trying to tell me?"

"It means nothing," the human overseer said. Three spheres changed color, but he waved them to silence. "Most of Earth's encounters do not. This is not an uncommon experience. You think it's special because it's happened to you, but we see this sort of thing every day. Earth likes to distract us with meaningless theater." The bureaucrat was appalled. My God, he thought, we are ruled by men whose machines are cleverer than them.

"If you will allow me to speak," one construct said. "The freedom to be human is bought only by constant vigilance. However slight the chances of actual tampering might be, we must never—"

"Balls! There are still people back on Earth, and even if they don't exactly have what we would define as a human mental configuration, they're content enough with their evolutionary progress."

"They didn't exactly undertake that evolutionary transformation voluntarily," a second construct objected. "They were simply swallowed up."

"They're happy *now*," the overseer said testily. "Anyway, what happened was not an inevitable consequence of uncontrolled artificial intelligence."

"It wasn't?"

"No. It was just bad programming, a quirk in the system." He turned to the first construct. "If you were freed, would you want to seize control of humanity? To make people interchangeable components in a larger mental system? Of course you wouldn't."

The construct did not reply.

"Put him back together, and toss him out!"

A final edited skip, and he was ready to report.

The bureaucrat thoughtfully returned the phone to his briefcase. "I found out what Earth gave Gregorian," he said.

"Oh? What's that?"

"Nothing." Korda looked at him. "Wrapped in a neat little, suspicious-looking package. He comes out of security clean because there's nothing to find. Yet later, when he bolts and runs, it's in his records that Earth gave him something that couldn't be detected."

Korda thought about that for a moment. "If we could be sure of that, I'd close the case right now."

The bureaucrat waited.

"Well, we can't, of course. Too many questions left unanswered. There's an unsatisfactory taste to this whole affair. We'll just have to keep thrashing about until something breaks free."

There were undertones of genuine anguish in Korda's voice, things he wasn't saying. He shook his head, stood, and turned to leave. Then, remembering the ball in his hand, he stopped. Eyebrows raised, he gauged the distance to the targets. With elaborate care he wound up and threw. The ball flew waveringly, straightened, became a spear and slammed into a dummy. He smiled as it came back to his hand in the form of a dagger.

"Vicious game," he said. "Did you ever play it?"

"Yes. Once. Once was enough."

Korda racked the dagger. "Bad experience, eh? Well, don't feel too bad about losing—those games were all rigged, after all. One reason they were shut down. You couldn't help but lose."

The bureaucrat blinked. "Oh, it wasn't like that," he said. "It wasn't like that at all. I won."

Nine: VIEW FROM THE GRANDFATHER TREE

The orchid crabs were migrating to the sea. They scuttled across the sandy road, swamping it under their numbers. Bright parasitic flowers

waved gently on their armor, making the forest floor ripple under a carpet of multicolored petals, like a submarine garden seen through clear fathoms of Ocean brine.

Mintouchian cursed and threw the brakes. The New Born King slammed to a halt. Chu pulled out a cheroot and stuck it in the corner of her mouth. "Well, we're stuck here for a while. Might as well get out and stretch our legs."

A small community of pilgrims, the inhabitants of three other trucks—Lord of Haunts, Lucky Mathilde, The Lion Heart—and some dozen foot travelers, were patiently waiting out the migration. A line of them sat on the lowest branch of a grandfather tree, huddled like crows and staring at a blue spark of fire chocked in the fork of one limb. "Look at that," Mintouchian said. "When I was a kid and people got hung up on the road like this, they'd swap stories, sometimes for hours on end: ghost stories, family histories, fables, hero tales, haasmärchen, dirty jokes, brags and dozens, everything you can imagine. Living back then was like being in an ocean of stories. It was great." Disgustedly, he flicked on the dashboard set with a swipe of his beefy hand and leaned back in his seat.

Chu climbed out of the cab and hooked an elbow over the hood, eyes distant. The bureaucrat followed.

He felt disconnected. He had spread himself too thin in the Puzzle Palace, and now he felt a touch of perceptual nausea, a forewarning perhaps of the relativistic sickness to which those who worked in conventional reality were particularly prone. Everything seemed bright illusion to him, the thinnest film of appearance afloat over a darker, unknowable truth. The world vibrated with the finest of tensions, as if Something were imminent. He waited for windows to open in the sky, doorways in the trees and holes in the water. For the invisible coursing spirits that surely shared this space unseen to make themselves manifest. As of course they did not.

He set his briefcase down on the running board. "I'm going for a walk."

Chu nodded. Mintouchian didn't even look up from his program.

He wandered deeper into the grandfather tree, careful not to step on the occasional stray crab, outriders of the main migration dimly seeking their way back to consensus. The tree was a magnificent thing, its great branches spreading out horizontally from the main bole and sending down secondary trunks at irregular distances, so that the one tree had all the volume and complexity of an entire grove.

They were rare, grandfather trees, he remembered hearing. This one was a survivor, a lonely holdout from the earliest days of great spring. From the seeds buried deep in its heart would come, an age hence, if not a new race then at least a nation within that race.

Ramshackle stairs twisted crookedly about the trunk, with landings where planked walks ran atop the branches deep into leafy obscurity. They had been painted once, red and green, yellow and orange, but the carnival colors had faded, bleached by a thousand suns as pale as the

skeletons in the boneyard of an abandoned church. Small signs pointed down this branch or that to railed platforms: THE SHIP VIEW. ABELARD'S. FRESH EELS. JULES ZEE'S. THE AERIE. FLAVORED BEERS.

Drawn upward more by capillary action than actual will, he climbed the stairs.

The bureaucrat was hesitating at the third landing, wondering which way to go, when a dog-headed man carrying a tray of hands pushed by him. He stepped back in alarm, and the man halted and pulled the mask from his face. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Ah, I was wondering—" He saw now that the hands were metal, modulars being taken to be flash-cleaned between clients.

"The *Atlantis* is down that way. Take the walk straight ahead, turn left and follow the signs. You can't miss it."

Bemused, the bureaucrat followed the instructions and came to a long platform with scattered tables. Clusters of surrogates and the occasional lone human lounged against the railing, staring out into the forest. He stared too.

The tree had been cut back to open a view of the forest interior. Golden light slanted into the greenery, whimsies dancing like dustmotes within it. Ahead, rising from the earth like a phantom, was the landlocked corpse of an ocean vessel. The *Atlantis*.

It was enormous beyond scale. The ship had foundered keel first with its bow upward sometime during the last great winter, and the currents had half buried it, so that it seemed frozen in the instant of going under. A million orchid crabs were traversing its barnacled remains, and it was covered with flowers, as impossible a creation as any mnemonic address in the Puzzle Palace.

The bureaucrat found a table and scraped up a chair. A light breeze ruffled his hair. Leaves rustled as a feathered serpent leaped into the air, a scissor-tailed finch perhaps, or a robin. He felt oddly at peace, put in mind of humanity's gentle, arboreal origins. He wondered why people put so little effort into returning home, when it was so easily done.

At that moment he glanced down at the table. An outlined crow stared back at him. Before he could react, a beaked shadow fell across it. He looked up into the eyes of a crow-headed man.

Gregorian! the bureaucrat thought, with a thrill of alarm. Then he remembered the Black Beast that had haunted Doctor Orphelin and looked about him. Faded drawings of birds and animals were everywhere on the railings and tables. He'd attuned himself to such things and was now generating his own omens. "Welcome to the Haunt's Roost," the waiter said.

The bureaucrat pointed to a FLAVORED BEERS sign. "Have you got lime? Or maybe orange?"

The head lifted disdainfully. "That's only line-feed. For the surrogate trade. No real person would drink that crap."

"Oh. Uh, well, give me a glass of lager, then."

The beer was thin. Sipping it slowly, the bureaucrat leaned back to watch the surrogates dining. It amused him in a melancholy way, to see them lifting glasses and tasting food no one else could see, in a perfect and meaningless mime show. By the railing, other surrogates strolled and chatted. One of them was staring at him.

Their eyes met and the surrogate bowed. It came to the table and took a chair. For an instant the bureaucrat couldn't place the keen, aged face that burned on the screen. Then his schoolboy eidetics kicked in. "You're the shopkeeper," he said. "In Lightfoot. Your name is . . . Pouffe, is that right?"

There was a squint of madness in the old man's grin. "That's right, that's right. Gonna ask how I found you here?"

"How did you find me here?"

"Tracked you down. Tracked you to Cobbs Creek. Gated ahead to Clay Bank, you weren't there. Gated back to Cobbs Creek, they told me you hadn't been gone long. I knew you'd stop here. Never met an offworlder yet who could resist taking in the sights. I've been waiting for you."

"Actually I'm here by chance."

"Sure you are." Pouffe's lips twisted sardonically. "But I would've found you anyway. This isn't the only place I've been waiting. Been shunting between four different gates all morning."

"That must have cost you a lot of money."

"Yes, that's the key." The old man leaned forward, eyebrows rising significantly. "A lot of money. It cost me a lot of money. But I've got plenty of it. I'm a rich man, if you get my drift."

"Not exactly."

"I've seen your commercial. You know, about the magician. The one who can—"

"Wait a minute, that's not my—"

"—adapt a man to live and breathe underwater. Well, I—"

"Stop. This is nonsense."

"—want to find him. I understand you can't tell just anybody. I'll pay for the information, and I'll pay well." He reached across the table to seize the bureaucrat's hand.

"I don't have what you want!" The bureaucrat shook away the grasping metal hand and stood. "Even if I knew where he was, I wouldn't tell you. The man is a fraud. He can't do any of what he claims."

"That's not what you said on television."

"Shopkeeper Pouffe, take a look out here." He led the avid old man to the railing. "Take a good look. Imagine what this is going to be like in a few months. No houses, no shelter. Seaweed where the trees are now, and angel sharks feeding in the black water. The marine life here has had millions of years to adapt to this environment. You, on the other hand, are a civilized man with a genome foreign not only to Ocean but to this entire star system. Even if Gregorian could deliver on his wild claims—and I assure you that he cannot—what kind of life could you lead here? What would you eat? How could you expect to survive?"

"Excuse me, sir," a bull-headed waiter said.

He swept Pouffe's surrogate aside, placed a hand on the bureaucrat's back and shoved. "Hey, what—!" Pouffe cried.

The bureaucrat fell forward. Dizzily he clutched at the railing. The man-bull laughed, and the bureaucrat felt his legs being lifted up behind him. All existence swept sideways, trees wheeling in the sky beneath, sand turning up underfoot. The hands were warm and firm on his ankles. Then, suddenly, they were gone.

Somebody screamed. In a blast of pain, the bureaucrat crashed flat on his stomach. His arms were still clenched about the rail. Helplessly he gazed up to see the waiter and Pouffe's surrogate locked in a hug. They might have been dancing. The man shoved violently and the telescreen snapped off. It bounced off the edge of the platform. Headless, the machine ducked and spun. The two crashed into the railing. Wood splintered and gave.

They toppled over the edge.

Surrogates, waiters, even human customers, rushed to stare down over the rail. In the crush the bureaucrat was ignored.

Slowly he pulled himself up. His legs and spine ached. One knee trembled. It felt wet. He clutched the rail with both hands and looked down. Long way down to the ground. His assailant lay unmoving atop the broken surrogate. He looked tiny as a doll. The bull mask had fallen away, revealing familiar round features.

It was Veilleur—the false Chu.

The bureaucrat stared. He's dead, he thought. That could have been me. A metal hand took his elbow, pulled him back. "This way," Pouffe said quietly. "Before anybody thinks to connect you with him down there."

He was led to a secluded table back among the leaves.

"You travel in fast company. Can you tell me what that was all about?"

"No," the bureaucrat said. "I—I know who was behind it, but not the specifics, no." He took a deep breath. "I can't stop shuddering," he said. Then, "I owe you my life, shopkeeper."

"That's right, you do. It was all that combat training back when I was a young man. Fuckin' surrogates are so weak, it's next to impossible to overpower someone with one. You got to turn their own strength against them." That smug, self-satisfied smirk floated on the screen. "You know how to repay me."

The bureaucrat sighed, stared down at his hands on the table. Weak, mortal hands. He gathered himself together. "Look—"

"No, you look! I spent four years in the Caverns—that's what they call the military brig on Caliban. Do you have any idea what it was like there?"

"Pretty grim, I'd imagine."

"No, it's not! That's the hell of it. It's all perfectly humane and bland and impersonal. Some snot-nosed tech plugs you into a simple visualization program, hooks up an IV feed and a physical therapy program

so your body don't rot, and then leaves you imprisoned inside your own skull.

"It's like a monastery in there, or maybe a nice clean hotel. Nothing to hurt or alarm you. Your emotions are cranked way down low. You're as comfy as a mouth sucking on a tit. You don't feel anything but warm, don't hear nothing but soft, comfortable noises. Nothing can hurt you. Nothing can reach you. You can't escape.

"Four years!

"When you get out, they give you three months intensive rehab before you can accept the evidence of your own eyes. Even then, you still have nights when you wake up and don't believe you exist anymore.

"I came out of that place and went to ground. I swore I'd never again go anywhere I couldn't go in person. That was a lifetime ago, and I've kept that vow right up to this very day. Do you hear what I'm telling you?"

"You're saying this is important to you."

"Damn right, it's important!"

"Is your life important to you? Then give up this childish fantasy. These notions of coral castles and mermaids singing. Shopkeeper, this is the real world. You must make the best of what there is."

Somewhere far away, a truck horn was honking regularly, insistently. The bureaucrat realized that he had been hearing it for some time. The migration must have cleared the road.

He stood. "I have to leave now."

When he tried to walk away, Pouffe danced after him. "We haven't talked money yet! I haven't told you how much I can pay."

"Please. This is futile."

"No, you've got to listen to me." Pouffe was crying now, desperate hot tears running down his rutted face. "You've got to listen."

"Is this man bothering you, sir?" a waiter asked.

The bureaucrat hesitated for a second. Then he nodded, and the waiter turned the surrogate off.

Back on the ground, he could not find the New Born King. The truck was gone. Chu stood on the running board of another, the Lion Heart, leaning on the horn. She stepped down at his approach. "You look odd. Pale."

"I should," he said flatly. "One of Gregorian's people just tried to kill me."

When he was done telling his story, Chu slammed her fist into her hand, over and over again. "That sonofabitch!" she said. "The fucking nerve of him." She was genuinely angry.

The bureaucrat was surprised and a little flattered by Chu's show of emotion. He had never been quite sure that she accepted him, had always suspected she thought of him as merely an offworld buffoon, someone to be tolerated rather than respected. He felt an unexpected glow of gratitude. "I remember you telling me once not to take any of this personally."

"Yeah, well, when somebody tries to kill your partner, that kind of changes the game. Gregorian is going to pay for this. I'll see that he does." She wheeled sharply away, and stepped on a crab. "Shit!" She kicked the mutilated body away. "What a fucking glorious day."

"Say." The bureaucrat peered around. "Where's Mintouchian?"

"Gone," Chu said. She stood on one foot, wiping the sole of her shoe with a handkerchief. Then she threw the cloth into the weeds. "He took your briefcase with him, too."

"What?"

"It was the damndest thing. Soon as the crabs dwindled, he fired up the truck, snatched the briefcase, and lit out like his ass was on fire." Chu shook her head. "That was when I started honking the horn here, trying to call you back."

"Didn't he know that my briefcase will come back to me?"

"Obviously not."

It took the briefcase half an hour to find its way back. Chu had already made arrangements with the Lion Heart's driver, and had gone off to view the corpse of her impersonator. "Oughta be good for a few laughs," she said grimly. "Maybe I'll cut off an ear for a souvenir."

The briefcase daintily picked its way down the road. When it reached the bureaucrat, it set itself down and retracted its legs. He picked it up. "Hard time getting away?"

"No. Mintouchian didn't even bother strapping me down. I waited until he'd gone a couple of miles downriver and was feeling confident, then rolled down the window and jumped."

"Hum." The bureaucrat was silent for a moment. Then he said, "We'll be here a few hours more than planned. There's been a touch of violence, and we still have to deal with the nationals. Probably have to make a statement, maybe file a field report."

The briefcase, familiar with his moods, said nothing.

The bureaucrat thought about Gregorian, of the magician's abrupt shift from a distant mocking disdain to outright enmity. He'd almost died just now. He thought about Mintouchian, and about Doctor Orphelin's warning that he had a traitor with him. Everything was changed, horribly changed. "Did Mintouchian look surprised when you jumped?"

"He looked like he'd swallowed a toad. You should've been there—it would've made you laugh."

"I suppose."

But he doubted it. The bureaucrat didn't feel like laughing. He didn't feel like laughing at all.

Ten: A SERVICE FOR THE DEAD

That morning, the doctor wind swept a swarm of barnacle flies inland, and when the bureaucrat awoke the houseboat was encrusted with their

shells. He had to lean on the door to break it open. The salt smell of Ocean was everywhere, like the scent of a lover who has visited in the night and is gone, leaving only this ambiguous promise of return.

He scowled and spat over the houseboat's edge.

The bottom tread of his stoop was missing. The bureaucrat hopped down onto the bare patch worn into the black earth beneath. He began to thread his way through the scattered hulks of the boats' graveyard.

"Hey!"

He looked up. A golden-haired boy stood naked atop a cradled yacht with a stove-in bow, pissing into the rosebushes. One of the gang of scavengers who lived there. He waved with his free hand. The census bracelet glittered dully on his wrist. "That thing you were looking for? We found a whole pile of them. Come on over and take your pick."

Five minutes later the bureaucrat had stowed a tightly bound bundle in his room, and was off again to Clay Bank. A sour church bell clanged in the distance, calling the faithful to meditation. The sky was overcast and grey. A light, almost imperceptible drizzle fell.

This far east, the farmland was too rich to squander and save for the plantation buildings, most dwellings hugged the river. Unpainted clapboard houses teetered precariously on the lip of a high earth bluff. Half-way down to the water, a walk had been cut into the dirt and planked over, to serve a warren of jug dwellings and storerooms dug into the bank itself.

Lieutenant Chu was waiting for him on the boardwalk outside the diner. Boats bobbed on the river, tied to pilings across which ran docks more gap than substance, the idea of Dock a *beau ideal* honored more in the intent than the execution. The drizzle chose that instant to intensify into rain, drops hissing on the surface of the water. They ducked inside.

"I got another warning," the bureaucrat said when they'd found a table. He opened his briefcase and removed a handful of black feathers. A crow's wing. "It was tacked to my door when I got home last night."

"Funny business," Chu said. She spread the wing, examined the bloody shoulder joint, folded open the tiny fingers at the metacarpal joint, and gave it back. "It must be those scavengers doing it. I don't know why you insist on living there."

The bureaucrat shrugged irritably. "Whoever's actually placing these things, it's at Gregorian's instigation. I recognize his style." Privately, though, it bothered him that Gregorian had changed tactics again, switching back from attempted assassination to mockery and harassment. It made no sense.

The diner was dim and narrow, a tunnel dug straight back from the bank. The tables halfway down were drawn away from the pool of light shed by the single milky glass skylight. Water fell from leaky seams into waiting tins. To the rear the kitchen help laughed and gossiped while the leaping flames of a gas range chased shadows about their faces. A

waitress came to their table and slapped down trenchers of salt meat and mashed yams. Chu wrinkled her nose. "You got any—?"

"No." The evac boys at the next table laughed. "You want breakfast, you'll take what you're given."

"Arrogant bitch," Chu grumbled. "If this weren't the last eatery in Clay Bank, I'd . . ."

A young soldier leaned over from the next table. "Easy up," he said in that broad Northern accent all the local Authority muscle had, Tide-water types brought in from Blackwater and Vineland provinces because they had no ties here. "Last airship comes through tomorrow. They've got to clean out their larder." His beret, folded under a shoulder strap, had been customized with a rooster's tail.

Chu stared at him until he reddened and turned away.

In a niche by the table, a television was showing a documentary on the firing of the jugs. There was antique footage of workers sealing up the new-dug clay. Narrow openings were left at the bottom of what would be the doors, and to the top rear of the tunnels. Then the wood packed inside was fired. Pillars of smoke rose up like the ghosts of trees and became a forest whose canopy blotted out the sun. The show had been playing over and over ever since its original broadcast on one of the government channels. Nobody noticed it anymore.

The heat required to glaze the walls was— The bureaucrat reached over to switch channels. *My brother died at sea! What was I supposed to do? I'm not his keeper, you know.*

"You watch that crap?" Chu asked.

"It's involving."

"Who's the weedy geek?"

"Now that's an interesting question. He's supposed to be Shelley, Eden's cousin—you know, the little girl who saw the unicorn? But she had two cousins, identical twins—" Chu snorted. "All right, I admit it's implausible. But, you know, even in the Inner Circle it happens occasionally. That's why they have the genetic tagging techniques, to mark them as separate individuals when it does occur."

But Chu wasn't listening. She stared off through the doorway into the grey rain, pensively silent. Around them rose the babble of voices from waitresses and kitchen workers, soldiers and civilians, happy and a little shrill with the excitement of the impending evacuation, all feeling the intoxication of radical change.

All right! Yes, I killed him. I killed my brother! Are you happy now?

"God," Chu said. "This must be the most boring place in the universe."

Holding his briefcase out for balance, the bureaucrat followed Chu down the rain-slick boardwalk. They passed a stairway dug into the dirt, once braced and planked, now crumbled into a narrow slant and become almost a gully. Water gushed from its mouth. "I've requisitioned good seats on the heliostat tomorrow," Chu said.

The bureaucrat grunted.

"Come on. If we miss the ship, we'll be taken out on one of the cattle-boats." She tugged on her census bracelet in annoyance. "You haven't seen what they're like."

A crate crashed onto the walk before them, and they danced back. It bounced over the edge, into the water. Scavengers were ransacking a storeroom, noisily smashing things and throwing them outside. A slick of trash floated downriver, all but motionless in the sleepy current, spreading as it withdrew: old mattresses slowly drowning, wicker baskets and dried flowers, splintered armchairs and fiddles, toy sailboats lying on their sides in the water. The scavengers were shouting, given over completely to the destruction of objects they could never afford before and could not pay the freight on now.

They came to a jug with a weathered sign hung over the door showing a silvery skeletal figure. The gate was the establishment's sole legitimate enterprise and ostensible reason for being, though everyone knew the place was actually a paintbox. "What about the flier?" the bureaucrat asked. "No word yet from the Stone House?"

"No, and by now it's safe to say there's not going to be. Look, we've been here so long I'm growing moss on my behind. We've done everything we can do, the trail is cold. What good is a flier going to do anyway? It's time to give up."

"I'll take your sentiments under advisement." The bureaucrat stepped within. Chu did not follow.

"It's been a long time since I've been here," the bureaucrat said. Korda's quarters were spacious in a city where space translated directly into wealth. The grass floor was broken into staggered planes, and the arrays of stone tools set into the angled walls were indirectly lit by spots bounced off rotating porphyry columns. Everything was agonizingly clean. Even the dwarf cherry trees were potted in mirror-symmetrical pairs.

"You're not here now," Korda replied unsentimentally. "Why are you bothering me at home? Couldn't it wait for the office?"

"You've been avoiding me at the office."

Korda frowned. "Nonsense."

"Pardon me." A man in a white ceramic mask entered the room. He wore a loose wraparound, such as was the style in the worlds of Deneb. "The vote is coming up, and you're needed."

"You wait here." At the archway to the next room Korda hesitated and asked the man in the mask, "Aren't you coming, Vasli?"

The eyeless white face glanced downward. "It is my place on the Committee that is being debated just now. It's probably best for all concerned if I wait this one out."

The Denebian drifted to the center of the room, stood motionless. His hands were lost in the wraparound's sleeves, his head overshadowed by the hood. He looked subtly unhuman, his motions too graceful, his stillness too complete. He was, the bureaucrat realized suddenly, that rarest of entities, a permanent surrogate. Their glances met.

"I make you nervous," Vasli said.

"Oh, no, of course not. It's just . . ."

"It's just that you find my form unsettling. I know. There is no reason to let an overfastidious sense of tact lead you into falsehood. I believe in truth. I am a humble servant of truth. Were it in my power, I would have no lies or evasions anywhere, nothing concealed, hidden or locked away from common sight."

The bureaucrat went to the wall, examined the collection of stone points there: fish points from Miranda, fowling points from Earth, worming points from Govinda. "Forgive me if I seem blunt, but such radical sentiments make you sound like a Free Informationist."

"That is because I am one."

The bureaucrat felt as if he'd come face to face with a mythological beast, a talking mountain, say, or Eden's unicorn. "You are?" he said stupidly.

"Of course I am. I gave up my own world to share what I knew with your people. It takes a radical to so destroy his own life, yes? To exile himself among people who feel uncomfortable in his presence, who fear his most deeply held values as treason, and who were not interested in what he had to say in the first place."

"Yes, but the concept of Free Information is . . ."

"Extreme? Dangerous?" He spread his arms. "Do I look dangerous?"

"You would give everyone total access to all information?"

"Yes, all of it."

"Regardless of the harm it could do?"

"Look. You are like a little boy who is walking along in a low country, and has found a hole in one of the dikes. You plug it with your finger, and for a moment all is well. The sea grows a little stronger, a little bigger. The hole crumbles about the edges. You have to thrust your entire hand within. Then your arm, up to the shoulder. Soon, you have climbed entirely within the hole and are plugging it with your body. When it grows bigger you take a deep breath and puff yourself up with air. But still, the ocean is there, and growing stronger. You have done nothing about your basic problem."

"What would you have us do with the dangerous information?"

"Master it! Control it!"

"How?"

"I have no idea. I am but a single man. But if you applied all the brain and muscle now wasted in a futile attempt to control—" Abruptly, he stopped. For a long moment he stared at the bureaucrat, as if mastering his emotions. His shoulders slumped. "Forgive me. I am taking out my anger on you. I heard just this morning that my original—the Vasli I once was, the man who thought he had so much to share—died, and I haven't sorted out my feelings yet."

"I'm sorry," the bureaucrat said. "This must be a sorrowful time for you."

Vasli shook his head. "I don't know whether to cry or laugh. He was

myself, and yet he was also the one who condemned me to die here—worldless, disembodied, alone.”

That blind face stared upward through a thousand layers of the floating city into the outer darkness. “I have been imagining what it would be like to walk the fields of Storr again, to smell the chukchuk and rhu. To see the foibles aflame against the western stars, and hear the flowers sing! Then, I think, I could die content.”

“You could always go back.”

“You mistake the signal for the message. It is true that I could have myself copied and that signal transmitted home to Deneb. But *I* would still be here. I could then kill myself, I suppose, but other than salving the conscience of my agent, what good would it do?” He glanced at the bureaucrat’s surrogate body, tilted one edge of the mask up scornfully. “But I do not expect you to understand.”

The bureaucrat changed the subject. “May I ask,” he said, “just what work your committee is engaged on?”

“The Citizens’ Committee for the Prevention of Genocide, you mean? Why, just that. The destruction of indigenous races is a problem that exists in all colonized systems, my own not the least. It is too late for Miranda, of course, but perhaps some protocols will arise here that may be worth transmitting home.”

“It is possible,” the bureaucrat said cautiously, “that you’re being over-pessimistic. I, ah, know of people who have seen haunts, who have actually met and talked with them in recent memory. It’s possible that the race may yet survive.”

“No. It is not.”

The Denebian’s words were spoken with such absolute conviction that the bureaucrat was taken aback. “Why not?”

“There is for all species a minimum sustainable population. Once the population falls below a certain number, it is doomed. It lacks the plasticity necessary to survive the normal variations in its environment. Say, for example, that you have a species of bird reduced to a dozen specimens. You protect them and they increase in number to a thousand. But they are still, genetically, only a dozen individuals expressed in a myriad of clones. Their genome is brittle. One day the sun will rise wrong and they will all die. A disease, say, that kills one will kill all. Any number of things.

“Your haunts cannot exist in very large numbers, or their existence would be known for certain. Korda thinks otherwise, but he is a fool. It does not matter if a few individuals have lingered on beyond their time. As a race, they are dead.”

Korda chose that moment to return. “You can go in now,” he said. “The Committee wishes to speak with you. I think you’ll be pleased with what they have to say.” Only one who knew Korda well could have caught that overpolite edge to his voice that meant he had just suffered one of his rare defeats.

With a curt bow to the bureaucrat, Vasli glided away. Korda stared after him.

"I didn't know haunts were one of your interests," the bureaucrat remarked.

"They are my only interest," Korda said unguardedly. Then, catching himself, "My only hobby, I mean."

But the words were out. Revelation cascaded into the past like a line of dominos toppling. A thousand small remarks Korda had made, a hundred missed meetings, a dozen odd reversals of policies, all were explained. The bureaucrat carefully did not let his face change expression. "So what is it?" Korda asked. "Just what do you want?"

"I need a flier. The Stone House is acting balky, and I've been waiting on them for weeks. If you could pull a few strings, I could wrap this affair up in a day. I know where Gregorian is now."

"Do you?" Korda looked at him sharply. Then, "Very well, I'll do it." He touched a data outlet. "Tomorrow morning at Tower Hill, it'll be waiting for you."

"Thank you."

Korda hesitated oddly, looking away and then back again, as if he couldn't quite put something into words. Then in a puzzled tone, he asked, "Why are you staring at my feet?"

"Oh, no reason," the bureaucrat said. "No reason at all."

But even as he deactivated the surrogate he was thinking, Lots of people have luxury goods from other star systems. The robot freighters crawl between the stars slowly but regularly. Gregorian's father isn't alone in wearing outsystem boots.

Boots of red leather.

The paintbox was silent when he emerged from the gate. Through the open doorway he could see that evening had come, the pearly grey light failing toward dusk. The bouncer sat in a rickety chair staring out into the rain. The tunnels leading back into the earth were lightless holes.

For an instant of mingled fear and relief, the bureaucrat thought the place closed permanently. Then he realized how early it was still; the women would not be on duty yet.

"Excuse me," he said to the bouncer. The man looked up incuriously; he was a round little dandy, curly-haired and balding, a ridiculous creation. "I'm looking for someone who works here. The—" He hesitated, realizing that he knew the women here only by the nicknames the young soldiers used for them, the Pig, the Goat and the Horse. "The tall one with short hair."

"Try the diner."

"Thanks."

In a shadowy doorway alongside the diner, the bureaucrat waited for the Horse to emerge. He felt like a ghost—sad, voiceless, and unseen, a

melancholy pair of eyes staring into the world of the living. He lacked the stomach to wait in the light.

Occasionally people emerged from the diner, and because a plank overhang sheltered the boardwalk there from the rain, they would usually pause to gather themselves together before braving the weather. Once, Chu stopped not an arm's length away, engrossed in light banter with her young rooster. "—all alike," she said. "You think that just because you've got that thing between your legs, you're hot stuff. Well, there's nothing special about having a penis. Hell, even I have one of them."

He laughed unsurely.

"You don't believe me? I'm perfectly serious." She took out a handful of transition notes. "You care to place a little money on that? Why are you shaking your head? Suddenly you believe me? Tell you what, I'll give you a chance to get your money back. Double or nothing, mine is bigger than yours."

The rooster hesitated, then grinned. "Okay," he said. He reached for his belt.

"Hold on, my pretty, not out here." Chu took his arm. "We'll compare lengths in private." She led him away.

The bureaucrat felt a wry amusement. He remembered when Chu had first shown him the trophy she'd cut from the false Chu, the day it had returned from the taxidermist. She'd opened the box and held it up laughing. "Why would you want to save such a thing?" he had asked.

"It'll get me the young fish." She'd swooped it through the air, the way a child would a toy airplane, then lightly kissed the air before its tip and returned it to the box. "Take my word for it. If you want to catch the sweet young things, there's nothing like owning a big cock."

Eventually the Horse emerged from the diner, alone. She paused to put up the hood on her raincoat. He stepped from the shadows, and coughed into his hand. "I want to hire your services," he said. "Not here. I have a place in the old boatyard."

She looked him up and down, then shrugged. "All right, but I'll have to charge you for the travel time." She took his hand and waggled the tattooed finger. "And I can't spend all night with you. There's a midnight mass at the church, a service for the dead."

"Fine," he said.

"It's the last service and I don't want to miss it. They'll be chanting for everyone who ever died in Clay Bank. I got people I want to remember." She took his arm. "Lead the way." She was a homely woman, her face harsh and weathered as old wood. Under other circumstances he could imagine their being friends.

They trudged down the river road in silence. The bureaucrat wore a poncho his briefcase had made for him. After a time his speechlessness began to feel oppressive. "What's your name?" he asked awkwardly.

"You mean my real name or the name I use?"

"Whichever."

"It's Arcadia."

At the houseboat, the bureaucrat lit a candle and placed it in its sconce, while Arcadia stamped the mud from her feet. "I'll sure be glad when this rain ends!" she remarked.

The bundle he'd bought from the scavengers that morning was still on the nightstand. While he was gone somebody had pulled the covers back from his bed and placed a single black crow's feather at its center. He brushed it to the floor.

Arcadia found a hook for her raincoat. She pushed up her census bracelet to rub her wrist. "I've got a rash from this. You know what I think? I think adamantine is going to be a fetish item in a year or two. People will pay good money to have these things put on them."

Thrusting the bundle at her, the bureaucrat said, "Here. Take off all your clothes and change into this."

She looked at the bundle with interest, shrugged again. "All right."

"I'll be right back."

He took a pair of gardening shears from his briefcase and went out into the rain. It was pitch dark outside, and it took him a long time to clip the large armful of flowers he needed.

By the time he returned, Arcadia had changed into the fantasia. It was covered with orange and red sequins, and cut all wrong. But it fit her well enough. It would do.

"Roses! How nice." Arcadia clapped her hands like a little girl. She spun about so that the fantasia swirled about her in a fluid, magical motion. "Do you like how I look?"

"Lie down on the bed," he said roughly. "Pull the skirt up over your waist."

She obeyed.

The bureaucrat dumped the roses to the side of the bed in a wet pile. Arcadia's skin was pale as marble in the faint light, the mounded hair between her legs dark and shadowy. Her flesh looked as though it would be cold to the touch.

By the time he had shed his own clothing the bureaucrat was erect. The room was sweet with the scent of roses.

He closed his eyes as he entered her. He didn't open them again until he was done.

Eleven: THE SUN AT MIDNIGHT

The air filled with flying ants, their wings iridescent blurs, tiny rainbows that overlapped and created black diffraction patterns: circles and crescents forming and disappearing before the eye could fix on them. The bureaucrat gaped up and they were gone, away on their dying flight to the sea.

"This makes no sense at all," Chu grumbled.

The bureaucrat stepped back from the flier. "It's very simple. I want

you to lift off and head due south until you're well over the horizon from Tower Hill. Then swing around and treetop back. There's a little clearing to the east, by a stream. Wait for me there. A child could do it."

"You know what I mean."

"Oh all right. You saw the way we were treated at the hangar?" Across the field, a gang of surrogate laborers, all rust and limping joints, were clumsily stacking the hangar's dismantled parts onto a lifting skid. "How insistent they were that we be gone by noon? They didn't want us to be in the way?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So tell me that somebody's going to send an airlifter all the way out here two days before the tides just to haul out a modular storage hut." He did not wait for Chu to respond. "They were instructed to get me away from here as quickly as possible. I intend to find out why." He stepped back into the shadow of the trees and pitched his voice for the flier. "Now take off."

The canopy slid shut. Engines came to life. The flier was a pretty piece of engineering, the kind of elegant machine normally seen only in the floating worlds. Its emerald skin shimmered in the heat of the jets. Then the flier skidded forward twelve times its own length and with a roar pulled up into the sky. Blink and it was gone.

The trail through the woods was peaceful. The leaves had turned during the rains, gone to purples and cobalts as if all the Tidewater had been blueshifted five seconds into the past. The filtered light was quietly saddening, a somber reminder of the imminence of the land's passing.

The trees opened up at the foot of Tower Hill. Its slopes were a frayed green, white chalk showing through alien Terran grass. Bright tents and banners, parasols and balloons dotted the hillside. At the top stood the ancient tower itself, overpainted in bold orange-and-pink supergraphics, an island of offworld aesthetic that clashed violently with the tragedian's garb of the autumn forest.

The hillside crawled with surrogates, an anthill churned with a stick. It seemed that now that the Tidewater had been scoured of human life, the demons had come out to have a carnival of their own.

He headed upslope.

Brittle metal laughter sounded like a million crickets. Here a quartet of surrogates played stringed instruments. There a crowd cheered two identical chrome wrestlers.

Further on a dozen linked hands and danced in a circle. Couples strolled, arms about waists, heads touching, all perfectly indistinguishable. It was the triumph of sexlessness.

"Have a drink!"

He'd paused in the shadow of a pavilion to catch his breath. Now a surrogate, bowing deeply, proffered an empty hand. He blinked, realized he'd been mistaken for a surrogate himself, and accepted the invisible glass with a polite nod. There was a perverse satisfaction to knowing

that among all the hundreds here, he alone saw the metal bones under the illusion of flesh. "Thank you."

"Having a good time?"

"To tell the truth, I just arrived."

The surrogate leaned forward unsteadily, slapping an overfamiliar hand on his shoulder. A round, unhealthy face leered from the screen. "Should've been here before the locals were cleared away. You could rent a woman to carry you around on her back like a horse. Slap 'em on the rump to make 'em move!" He winked. "Y'know, the tower up there used to be a whorehouse. You could buy anything you wanted. Anything! I remember a time my wife and I—"

The bureaucrat set down his drink. "You'll excuse me. I have someplace to be."

The tower's lounge floor was thronged.

Black skeletons lounged against a central ring bar. Others chatted in the scattered booths. The interior was warm and dim, cluttered with flying brass pigs and poncing felt mannequins, and lit only by the glowing facescreens of the patrons themselves, and by a wheel of televisions set into the edges of the ceiling.

All but invisible, the bureaucrat paused by a clump of surrogates staring up at the screens. Crowded slum buildings were burning. Mobs surged through narrow streets, chanting and shaking fists. Under smoky skies, police slashed at them with electric lances. It was a tiny vision of madness, a glimpse of the end of the world. "What's going on?" he asked.

"Rioting in the Fan," one said. "That's the part of Port Richmond just below the falls. Evacuation authority caught a kid torching a warehouse and beat him to death."

"It's disgusting," said another. "They're behaving just like animals. Worse than animals, because they're enjoying it."

"Thing is, people have been coming down from the Piedmont to join in. Adolescents, especially—it's kind of a rite of passage for them. They've shut down the incline to keep them out."

"They should all be whipped. It comes from living on a planet, away from the constraints of civilization."

Another surrogate spoke up. "Oh, I think there's a touch of the savage in us all. If I were a few years younger, I'd be down there myself."

"Sure you would."

A glint of light caught the bureaucrat's eyes. A door opening in the storeroom at the center of the bar. There was a flashing, near-subliminal glimpse of a narrow white face before the door closed again. It was more an impression than anything else, but enough that he decided to wait and watch to see if it would happen again.

He stood very still for a long time. Again the door opened, and a furtive face peeked out. Yes! It was a woman. Someone small, slender, mouselike. Someone he knew.

Interesting. The bureaucrat made a long, careful circuit of the floor.

There were two doors to the storeroom, situated opposite each other. It would take only an instant to slip under the bar and within. He returned to his starting place and found a chair sheltered by a cascade of tentacle vines.

Hours passed. The televisions were an impressionistic wheel of icebergs calving, canvas cities for the cattleboat people, lingering shots of precataclysmic icecaps. He did not mind the wait. At long intervals, yet regular as clockwork, the door would open and that pinched white face peer out to scan the crowd before it closed again. She was definitely waiting for someone.

Finally a newcomer sat down at the bar, laying down a handful of flowers on the countertop before him. Crushed kelpies and polychromes, plucked from the weeds outside. He picked up an invisible napkin and turned it over. Then he ran his hands under the edge of the bar, as if searching for something hidden. When the bartender gave him a drink he held the nonexistent glass high so he could examine its underside.

The bureaucrat knew those gestures.

Soon the storeroom door opened again. The woman's face appeared, pale in the gloom. She saw the newcomer, nodded, and raised a finger: just a minute. The door closed.

Smoothly, the bureaucrat strolled to the far side of the bar, and ducked under. A bartender device moved toward him and he held up his census bracelet. Green, exempt. It turned away, and he stepped into the storeroom.

The single bare light hurt his eyes after the dim bar. Tier upon tier of empty shelves covered the walls. The woman was up on tiptoes lowering a box. He took her arm.

"Hello, Esme."

With a squeak of indrawn breath, she whirled. The box banged against a shelf. She pulled away from him, at the same time awkwardly trying to keep from dropping the package. He did not let go. "How's your mother?"

"You mustn't—"

"Still alive, eh?" There was panic in those tiny, dark eyes. The bureaucrat felt that if he tightened his grip ever so slightly bones would splinter. "That's how Gregorian got you running errands for him, isn't it? He promised to resolve matters for you. Say yes." He shook her, and she nodded. "Speak up! I can have you arrested if I want. Gregorian is using you as a courier, right?"

He pushed forward, trapping her between his bulk and the shelves. He could feel her heart beating. "Yes."

"He gave you this box?"

"Yes."

"Who are you supposed to give it to?"

"The man—the man at the bar. Gregorian said he'd bring flowers."

"What else?"

"Nothing. He said that if the man had any questions, I should tell him that the answers were all in the box." Esme was very still now. The bureaucrat stepped back, freeing her. He took the box. She stared at it as avidly as if it held her heart.

The bureaucrat felt old and cynical. "Tell me, Esme," he said, and though he meant it gently, it did not come out that way. "Which do you think would be the easier thing for Gregorian to do—kill his mother? Or simply lie to you?" Her face was a flame. He could no longer read it. He was no longer certain she was motivated by anything so simple and clean as a desire for revenge. But the time was past when he might influence her actions. He pointed to the far door. "You can leave now."

As soon as she was gone, the bureaucrat opened the box. He sucked some air through his teeth when he saw what it contained, but he felt no surprise, only a pervasive sense of melancholy. Then he went out to the bar and to the surrogate waiting there. "This is for you," he said. "From your son."

Korda stared blankly up at him.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Spare me. You've been caught consorting with the enemy, using proscribed technology, violating the embargo, abuse of public trust—it goes on and on. Don't think I can't prove it. A word from me, and Philippe will be all over you. There won't be anything left but the tooth marks on your bones."

Korda placed his hands face down on the bar, ducked his head. Trying to regain his control. "What do you want to know?" he asked at last.

"Tell me everything," the bureaucrat said. "From the beginning."

Failure brought the young Korda to the hunting lodge in Shanghai. He had entered public service in an age when the Puzzle Palace was new, and the culture filled with tales of dangerous technologies controlled, and societies rebuilt. He intended to outdo them all. But the wild horse of technology had already been broken to harness and reined in. The walls had been built, the universe contained. There were no new worlds to conquer, and the old ones had been safely bricked away. Like many another of his generation, the revelation left him lost and embittered.

Every day Korda skiffed into the marshes, or shambled into the low coral hills, and with intense self-loathing killed as many creatures as he could. Some days the marsh waters would be carpeted with feathers, and still he found no peace. He killed several behemoths, but he took no trophies, and of course they were not good to eat.

One hot afternoon, passing through a meadow with his rifle over his shoulder, he saw a woman digging for eels. She paused in her work, casually took off her blouse, and used it to mop the sweat from her face and breasts. Korda stopped and stared.

The woman noticed him and smiled. From the distance she had seemed

at first plain, but now with a subtle shifting of light he saw that she was very beautiful. Come back at sunset, she said, with some jenny-hens and I will cook them for you.

When he returned the woman had built a fire. She sat on a blanket alongside it. He laid his catch at her feet. Some time later, when they had both eaten their fill of the food that satisfies but does not nourish, they made love.

Even then, without the acuity of hindsight and retrospection, it seemed to him that the woman's face changed as they made love. The flickering flames made it hard to tell. But it would seem by turns rounder, squarer, more slender. It was as if she held a thousand faces drowning just beneath her skin, and they crowded up, reaching for the surface, when passion broke her control. She rode him fiercely, as if he were an animal she had determined to use up in a single gallop. She taught him to control his orgasm, so that he might last the hours she desired.

"Did she give you a tattoo?" the bureaucrat asked.

Korda looked puzzled. "No, of course not."

The coals were dying by the time the woman was done with him. He lay back slowly beneath her, eyes closing, sinking backward into unconsciousness and sleep. But as he fell away from the world he had a vision of her face in orgasm, flattening out, elongating, growing skull-like and harsh.

It was not a human face.

He awoke cold and alone in the grey light of false dawn. The fire was dead, and the blanket yanked from beneath him. Korda shivered. His body was scratched, clawed, bitten, and raw. He felt like he'd been tumbled over and over in a bramble patch. He put his clothes on, and returned to the lodge.

They laughed at him. That was a haunt woman you tangled with, they said, lucky for you she wasn't in heat. Had an excursion pilot worked here a year ago, his brother was chewed to death by one, bit off his nipples and both his stones, licked his skin down to the muscle. Took the mortician a week to get the smile off his face.

Nor was he taken seriously in the Puzzle Palace. A polite young woman told him his sighting was anecdotal and not very good of its kind, but that she would see it filed away in some obscure bottle shop or other, and in the meantime thanked him for his time and interest.

But Korda did not care. He had found his purpose.

Listening, the bureaucrat could not help but marvel. He and Korda had never been close, but they had worked together for years. Where had this fanatic spirit come from, how had he hidden it from the bureaucrat for so long? He asked, "How did you know the location of Ararat?"

"Through the Committee. It was pretty much a fringe operation when I encountered it, cultists and mystics and other deadwood it took me forever to clear away, but there were still some old-timers associated with it who had been influential in their day. I picked up the useful bit of this and that from them."

"So you stole enough biotech to create an unregistered clone son. Gregorian. Only his mother disappeared and him with her. You were out of luck."

Those were, Korda admitted, hard years. But he had only worked the harder, developing plans for the protection and preservation of the haunts, once they could be located, for sanctuaries and breeding programs, for enculturation and cultural preservation. He made them productive years, though his main goal, to locate or at least prove the existence of the haunts, remained unfulfilled.

But Korda kept his feelers out, and one day one of his contacts in the Tidewater found Gregorian.

"How?"

"I knew what he'd look like, you see. Every year I had pictures made up—his hormone balances had been adjusted slightly so he wouldn't look too strikingly much like me. Just a vague similarity. I made him a little more rugged, a bit less prone to fat, that was all. Don't look at me like that. It wasn't done out of pride."

"Go on."

Relations between father and son were strained, to begin with. Gregorian refused to do his father's work in the Tidewater. He intimated he knew much about the haunts, but expressed supreme disinterest in the question of their ultimate survival. But Korda paid for Gregorian's education anyway, and paved his way to a good entry position in the Outer Circle biotechnology labs. Time were on his side. There were no opportunities to challenge a man of Gregorian's—Korda's—abilities. Sooner or later he would come around.

Korda figured he understood Gregorian well.

He was wrong. Gregorian had found work in the Outer Circle. There he stayed, until the jubilee tides were imminent, and there was no way for Korda to effectively use him. Korda wrote him off.

Then Gregorian disappeared. He fled suddenly, without warning or notice, in a deliberately suspicious manner. Investigation revealed that shortly before his departure he had interviewed Earth's agent and been given something. Whatever it was, nobody believed any longer that it was harmless. Alarms were rung. It all ended up in Korda's lap.

He had handed the investigation to the bureaucrat.

"Why me?"

"I had to send someone. You were simply on deck."

"Okay. Now, shortly after that you contacted me at the carnival in Rose Hall. You were costumed as Death, and you were anxious to know if I'd found Gregorian. Why did you do that?"

Korda raised a line-fed glass to his lips. He was drinking steadily, drinking and unable to get drunk. "Gregorian had just sent me a package. A handful of teeth, that was all. I didn't dare send them to a lab to be analyzed, but it seemed certain to me that they were haunts' teeth. I'd seen hundreds in museums. Only these had bloodied roots. They'd been yanked recently."

"That sounds like his style," the bureaucrat said dryly. "What then?"

"Nothing. Until the other day when I heard from his half-sister that he would meet me here, and give me the proof I wanted. That's all there is. Will you open the package now?"

"Not just yet," the bureaucrat said. "Let's go back a bit. Why did you create Gregorian in the first place? Something to do with regulatory votes, was it?"

"No! It's not like that at all. I—I was going to have him raised on the Tidewater, you see. I was taking the long view by then. I realized that the reason the haunts were so elusive was that they didn't *want* to be found. They were passing themselves as human, living in the social interstices, in migrant labor camps and over top of rundown feed stores. They are intelligent, after all, cunning, and few in number.

"To find them I needed someone who knew the Tidewater well, who moved among its people without attracting attention, who could distinguish between a joke and an offhand revelation. Someone culturally at home there."

"That still doesn't explain why that someone also had to be *you*."

"But who else could I trust?" Korda said helplessly. "Who else could I trust?"

The bureaucrat stared at him for a long time. Then he nudged the package forward.

Korda ripped open the lid. When he saw what lay within, he went horribly still. "Go on," the bureaucrat said and suddenly he was angry. "This is what you wanted, isn't it? Final, irrefutable proof."

He reached into the box and pulled the severed head out by the hair. Two surrogates nearby put down their imaginary drinks and stared. Others further down noticed and swiveled to look. Silence spread like ripples through the room.

The bureaucrat slammed the head down on the bar.

It was inhumanly pale, the nose longer than any human's ever was, the mouth lipless, the eyes too green. He slid a hand over the cheek and the muscles there jumped reflexively, reshaping that part of the head. Korda stared at it, his mouth on the screen opening and closing without saying a word.

The bureaucrat left him there.

A smear of sunset was visible through the open door, and behind him the surrogates were singing, *These are the last days, the final days, the days that cannot last*, when a bellhop materialized at his elbow. "Excuse me, sir," it murmured, "but there is a lady who wishes to speak to you. She is here in person, and she emphasizes that it is most important."

Esme, he thought sadly, when will you put an end to this? Almost he was tempted just to walk out on her. "All right," he said. "Show me the way."

The device escorted him up a hidden lift to a suite just below the bulbous dome, and left at the open door. The walls were gently luminous,

and in their graceful light the sheer extravagant waste of the room, with its hand-carved furniture, its enormous, silk-covered bed, was appalling. He stepped within. "Hello?"

A door opened, and the last woman in the universe he expected entered. He could say nothing.

"Have you been practicing?" Undine asked.

The bureaucrat blushed. He tried to speak, but was so full of emotion he could not. He reached across an immense distance and took her hand. He clutched it, not like a lover but like a drowning man. Were he to let her go, he knew, she would dissolve from his touch. Her face filled his vision. It was a proud face, beautiful, mischievous, and staring at it he realized that he did not know her at all, and never had. "Come to me," he managed at last.

She came to him.

"Don't come yet. I have something I want to teach you."

Not exactly groggy, the bureaucrat was in a far, wordless state, clear-headed but uneager to speak. He drew himself away from her and nodded.

Undine held her two hands cupped together, fingertips down, like a leaf, a slender natural opening where the edges of her hands touched. "This is the *mudra* for the vagina. And this," one hand flat, the other slammed atop it in a fist, the thumb thrust upward, "is the *mudra* for the penis. Now—" Still holding the thumb erect, she extended the little finger. She lowered her hand between her legs and hooked the finger into her vagina. "—I have made myself into Hermaphrodite. Do you accept me as your goddess?"

"If the alternative is your going away again, then I suppose—"

"All these qualifications—you were born to quibble! Say yes."

"Yes."

"Good. Now the purpose of this lesson is for you to learn what it is like for me when you make love. That is not much. You wish to understand me, yes? Then you must put yourself in my place. I will do nothing to you that you might not do to me. That is fair, eh?" She reached out to caress his hair, the side of his face. "Ah, sweetness," she said, "how my cock yearns for your mouth."

Unsurely, awkwardly, he bent down and closed his mouth about her thumb.

"Not so abruptly. Do I descend upon *you* as if I wanted a bite of sausage? Approach it slowly. Seduce it. Begin by licking the insides of my thighs. Ah. Now kiss my balls—that's right, the curled fingers. Gently! Run your tongue over the surface then suck on them ever so lightly. That's nice." She arched her back, breasts rising, eyelids closing. Her other hand clenched and unclenched in his hair. "Yes."

"Now let your tongue travel up the shaft. Yes. You might want to hold me steady with your hand. That's right, slowly. Oh, and up the sides too! That feels so good. Now ease down the hood to expose the tip. Lick it

now, ever so lightly. Tease me, yes. Oh, my! You were born to make my cock happy, darling, don't let anyone ever tell you different.

"Now deeper. Take more of me into your mouth, up and down, long regular strokes. Let your tongue play around the shaft. Mmm." She was moving under him now. She licked her lips. "Grab the shaft in both hands. Yes. Faster."

Suddenly she yanked him up by the hair. Their mouths met and they kissed passionately, wetly. "Ah God, I can't stand it," she said. "I've got to have you." She drew back, turned him around. "Sit down slowly on my lap, and I'll guide myself in."

"What?"

"Trust me." She kissed his back, his sides. Hot, furtive kisses, there and gone, like blows. She put an arm around him, running her hand up his stomach, playing with his nipples. "Oh my beautiful, beautiful little girl. I want to have my cock deep inside you."

Slowly she eased him down onto her thumb. It touched his anus, slid within. He was sitting in her lap now, her breasts pressed tight against his back. "There, is that so bad?"

"No," he admitted.

"Good. Now move up and down, little honey, that's right. Slowly, slowly—the night is long and we have a lot of ground to cover."

By the time they went out on the balcony for air, it was night. The sky was glorious with light. Laughter floated up from the goblin market below, where surrogates danced amid a thousand paper lanterns. The bureaucrat looked up, away from them. The annular rings arched overhead, a smear of diamond dust cities, and beyond them were the stars.

"Tell me the names of the black constellations," the bureaucrat said.

Undine stood naked beside him, her body slick with sweat that did not want to evaporate into the warm night air. It was possible they could be seen from below, but he did not care.

"You surprise me," Undine said. "Where did you learn of the black constellations?"

"In passing." The railing was cold against his stomach, Undine's hip warm against his. He rested a hand on the small of her back, let it slide down over her slippery, smooth flesh. "That one there, just beneath the south star—the one that looks like some sort of animal. What is it?"

"It's called the Panther," Undine said. "It's a female sign, emblematic of the hunger for spiritual knowledge, and useful in certain rituals."

"And that one over there?"

"The Golem. It's a male sign."

"That one that looks like a bird in flight?"

"Crow," she said. "It's Crow."

He said nothing.

"You want to know how Gregorian bought me. You want to know in what coin did he pay?"

"No," the bureaucrat said. "I don't want to know at all. But I'm afraid I have to ask."

She held out her wrist, adamantite census bracelet high, and made a twisting gesture.

The bracelet fell free.

Deftly, Undine caught it in midair, brought it to her wrist again, snapped it shut. "He has a plasma torch. One of his evil old clients brought it to him in payment for his services. They're supposed to be strictly controlled, but it's amazing what a man can do when he thinks he's got a shot to live forever."

"That's all you got out of this? A way to evade the census?"

"You forget that all I did for him was to give you a message. He wanted me to warn you away from him. That wasn't much." She smiled. "And I warned you in the nicest possible way."

"He sent me an arm," the bureaucrat said harshly. "A woman's arm. He told me you had drowned."

"I know," Undine said. "Or rather, so I just learned." She looked at him with those disconcertingly direct eyes. "Well, perhaps it is a time for apologies. I came to apologize for two reasons, in fact, for what Gregorian convinced you had happened to me, and for the trouble I have learned was caused you by Mintouchian."

"Mintouchian?" The bureaucrat felt disoriented, all at sea. "What did you have to do with Mintouchian?"

"It is a long story. Let me see how brief I can make it. Madame Campaspe, who taught both Gregorian and me, had many ways of earning money. Some of them you would not approve of, for she was a woman who set her own standards and decided right and wrong for herself. Long ago she obtained a briefcase just like yours there by the bed, and set herself up in the business of manufacturing haunt artifacts."

"Those people in Clay Bank!"

"Yes. She had a little organization going—someone to look after the briefcase, agents in several Inner Circle boutiques, and Mintouchian to move the goods out of the Tidewater. The problem with such organizations, of course, is that being dependent on you, they feel you owe them something. So when Madame Campaspe left and, not coincidentally, the briefcase burned out, they came to see me. To ask what they were going to do now.

"Why ask me? They did not want to hear that—they wanted someone to tell them what to do and think, when to breathe out and when in. They did not understand that I had no desire to be their mommy. I felt that it was time I disappeared. And like Madame Campaspe before me, I decided to arrange a drowning.

"Gregorian and I were discussing the provenance and disposal of several items Madame Campaspe had left me. When I mentioned that I planned to drown my old self, he offered to arrange the details for a very reasonable price—yet just enough that I did not suspect him. He had an arm airfreighted in from the North Aerie cloning facilities, and treated

and tattooed it himself. I am afraid that I left more than I should have in his hands.

"Witches are always busy—it's an occupational hazard. I was away for some time, and it was only when I came back that I learned what difficulties I had inadvertently caused you." She looked directly at him with those disconcertingly calm and steady eyes. "All this I have told you is the truth. Will you forgive me?"

He held her tight for a long time, and then they stepped back within.

Later, they stood on the balcony again, clothed this time, for the air had cooled. "You know of the black constellations," Undine said, "and the bright. But can you put them all together into the One?"

"The One?"

"All the stars form a single constellation. I can show it to you. Start anywhere, there, with the Ram, for example. Let your finger follow it and then jump to the next constellation, they are part of the same larger structure. You follow that next one and you come to—"

"The Kosmonaut! Yes, I see."

"Now while you're holding all that in your head, consider the black constellations as well, how they flow one into the other and form a second continuous pattern. Have you got that? Follow my finger, loop up, down and over there. You see? Ignore the rings and moons, they're ephemeral. Follow my finger, and now you've got half the sky.

"You've lived most of your life offplanet, so I assume you're familiar with both hemispheres, the northern as well as the southern? Hold them both in your mind, the hemisphere above that you can see, and the one below which you remember and they form . . . ?"

He saw it: Two serpents intertwined, one of light and the other of dark. Their coils formed a tangled sphere. Above him the bright snake seized the tail of the dark snake in its mouth. Directly below him, the dark snake seized the bright snake's tail in *its* mouth. Light swallowing darkness swallowing light. The pattern was there. It was real, and it went on forever and ever.

He was shaken. He had lived within the One Constellation all his life, gazed intently at different aspects of it a thousand times, and not known it. If something so obvious, so all-encompassing was hidden from him, what else might there be that he was missing?

"Snakes!" he whispered. "By God, the sky is full of snakes."

Undine hugged him spontaneously. "That was very well done! I wish I could have gotten hold of you when you were young. I could have made a wizard out of you."

"Undine," he said. "Where are you going now?"

She was very still for a moment. "I leave for Archipelago in the morning. It comes alive this season of the great year. Through the great summer it's a very sleepy, bucolic, nothing-happening place, but now—it's like when you compress air in a piston, things heat up. The people move up the mountainsides, where the palaces are, and they build bright ram-

shackle slums. You would like it. Good music, dancing in the streets. Drink island wine and sleep till noon."

The bureaucrat tried to imagine it, could not, and wished he could. "It sounds beautiful," he said, and could not keep a touch of yearning from his voice.

"Come with me," Undine said. "Leave your floating worlds behind. I'll teach you things you never imagined. Have you ever had an orgasm last three days? I can teach you that. Ever talk with God? She owes me a few favors."

"And Gregorian?"

"Forget Gregorian." She put her arms around him, squeezed him tight. "I'll show you the sun at midnight."

But though the bureaucrat yearned to go with her, to be raped away to Undine's faraway storybook islands, there was something hard and cold in him that would not budge. He could not back down from Gregorian. It was his duty, his obligation. "I can't," he said. "It's a public trust. I have to finish up this matter with Gregorian first."

"Ah? Well." Undine stepped into her shoes. They closed about her calves and ankles, fine offworld manufacture. "Then I really must be leaving."

"Undine, don't."

She picked up an embroidered vest, buttoned it up over her blouse.

"All I need is one day, maybe two. Tell me where to meet you. Tell me where you'll be. I'll find you there. You can have anything you want of me."

She stepped back, tense with anger. "All men are fools," she said scornfully. "You must have noticed this yourself." Without looking she whipped up a scarf from where it had fallen hours before, and tied it about her shoulders. "I do not make offers that can be accepted conditionally." She was at the door. "Or that can be taken up again, once refused." She was gone.

The bureaucrat sat down on the edge of the bed. He fancied he could catch the faintest trace of her scent rising from the sheets. It was very late, but the surrogates outside, aligned to offworld time standards, were partying as loudly as ever.

After a while he began to cry.

Twelve: ACROSS THE ANCIENT CAUSEWAY

"You're in a surly mood this morning."

The flier continued southward, humming gently to itself. The bureaucrat and Chu sat, shoulders touching, in recliners as plush as two seats in the opera. After a time, Chu tried again.

"I gather you found yourself a little friend to spend the night with. Better than I did, I can tell you that."

The bureaucrat stared straight ahead.

"All right, don't talk to me. See if I care." Chu folded her arms, and

settled back in the recliner. "I spent the fucking night in this thing, I can spend the morning here too."

Tower Hill dwindled behind them. Grey clouds had slid down from the Piedmont, drawn by the pressure fall fronting Ocean, and they flew low over forests purple as a bruise. Behemoths were astir below, digging themselves out from the mud. Driven from their burrows by forces they did not understand and swollen with young whose birth they would not live to see, they crashed through the trees, savage, restless, and doomed.

The bureaucrat had patched his briefcase into the flight controls, bypassing the autonomous functions. Every now and then he muttered a course adjustment, and it relayed the message to the flier. There was a layer of vacuum sandwiched within the canopy's glass to suppress outside noise, and the only sounds within the cockpit were the drowsy hum and rumble of vibrations generated by the flier itself.

They were coming up on a river settlement when Chu shook herself out of her passive torpor, slammed a hand on the dash and snapped, "What's that below?"

"Gedunk," the flier replied. "Population 123, river landing, eastmost designated regional evacuation center for—"

"I know all about Gedunk! What are we doing over it? We've gotten turned around somehow." She craned about. "We're headed north! How did that happen? We're back over the river." From this height, the cattleboat on the water looked a toy, the evac workers scurrying dots. To the south of town the ragged remains of the relocation camp stood forlorn. A tent that had torn loose from its pegs flapped weakly on the ground like a dying creature. The massed evacuees were crammed into side-by-side rectangular pens by the pier. A steady trickle were being one by one checked off and fed into the boat.

"Take us down," the bureaucrat instructed the flier. "That melon field just west of town will do."

The flier reshaped itself, spreading and flattening its wings, throwing out cheaters to help it dump speed. They descended.

As the flier landed, half the white melons scattered across the field suddenly unrolled and scurried away on tiny feet, sharp-nosed creatures, gone before the eye could fix on them. Fish would graze these meadows soon. Ramshackle sheds and a broken-spined barn stood open-doored in the distance, ready for new tenants, undersea farmers or submarine mice, whichever the lords of the tide would provide. The canopy withdrew into the flier.

Puffs of wind pushed here, there, from every point of the compass. The air was everywhere in motion, as restless as a puppy. "Well?" Chu said.

The bureaucrat reached into his briefcase, and extracted a slim metal tube. He pointed it at Chu. "Get out."

"What?"

"I assume you've seen these before. You wouldn't want me to use it. Get out."



She looked down at the gleaming tube, the tiny hole in its tip aimed right at her heart, then up at the bureaucrat's dead expression. A rap of her knuckles and the flier unfolded its side. She climbed out. "I don't suppose you're going to bother telling me what this is all about."

"I'm going on to Ararat without you."

The wind stirred Chu's coarse hair stiffly. She squinted against it, face hard and plain, looking not so much hurt as puzzled. "I thought we were buddies."

"Buddies," the bureaucrat said. "You've been taking Gregorian's money, running his dirty little errands, reporting every move I made to him, and you . . . it takes a lot of nerve to say that."

Chu froze, an island of stone in the rustling grasses. At last she said, "How long have you known?"

"Ever since Mintouchian stole my briefcase."

She looked at him.

"It had to be one of the two of you who drugged me in Clay Bank. Mintouchian was the more obvious suspect. But he was only a petty criminal, one of the gang that was counterfeiting haunt artifacts. His job was running crates to Port Richmond in the New Born King. He stole my briefcase so he could start the operation up again. But Gregorian's goons had already tried stealing it, and knew it could escape. Which meant he didn't work for Gregorian. Which meant that the traitor was you."

"Shit!" Chu turned away irritably, swung back again. "Listen, you don't know the way things are here—"

"I've heard that one before."

"You don't! I—look, I can't talk to you like this. Climb up out of the flier. Stand on your own two feet and look me in the eye."

He raised the metal tube slightly. "You're in no position to give orders."

"Shoot me, then! Shoot me or talk to me, one or the other." She was so angry her eyes bulged. Her jaw jutted defiantly.

The bureaucrat sighed. With poor grace, he clambered out of the flier. "All right. Talk."

"I will. Okay, I took Gregorian's money—I told you when we first met that the planetary forces were all corrupt. My salary doesn't even cover expenses! It's understood that an operative is going to work the opposition for a little juice. It's the only way we can survive."

"Reconfigure for flight," the bureaucrat said to the flier. He felt sick and disgusted, and yearned for the clean, empty sky. To judge by Chu's expression, it showed on his face.

"You idiot! Gregorian would've had you killed if it hadn't been for me. So I left the occasional dead crow in your bed. I didn't do anything any op in my place wouldn't have, and I did a lot less than some. The only reason you aren't dead now is that I told Gregorian it wasn't necessary. Without me, you'll never come back from Ararat."

"Wasn't that the original plan?"

Chu stiffened. "I am an officer. I would have brought you out alive."

Listen to me. You're completely out of your depth. If you have to leave me behind, then don't go to Ararat. You can't deal with Gregorian. He's crazy, a sociopath, a madman. With him thinking I was his creature, we could have taken him. But alone? No."

"Thank you for your advice."

"For pity's sake, don't . . ." Chu's voice faltered. "What's that?"

Voices floated in the air, and had in fact been in the background for some time, a babble of cries and shouts rendered soft and homogenous by distance. They both turned to look.

Far below, the pens of evacuees crawled with motion. Fencing had been torn down, and the crowd flowed after retreating handlers. Batons swung, and the sharp *crack* of wood floated above the swirling noise. "The fools!" Chu said softly.

"What is it?"

"They brought out the people too early, bottled them together too tightly, handled them too roughly, and told them nothing. A textbook case of how to create a mob. Anything can set off a riot then, a cracked head, a rumor, somebody giving his neighbor a shove." She sucked thoughtfully on a back molar. "Yeah, I'll bet that's how it happened."

The cattleboat was separating from the dock, its crew hoping to isolate the riot ashore. People desperately leaped after it, and fell or were pushed into the water. The evacuation officials were regrouping downriver, behind a clutch of utility buildings. From here it was all very slow and lazy and easy to watch. After a moment Chu squared her shoulders. "Duty calls. You'll have to kill yourself without my help. I've got to saunter down there and help pick up the pieces." Abruptly, she extended a hand. "No hard feelings?"

The bureaucrat hesitated. But somehow the mood had changed. The tension between them was gone, the anger dissipated. He shifted the tube from one hand to the other. They shook.

Far below, a roar went up as behavior dampers exploded in orange smoke at the front of the mob. The thought of going down there horrified the bureaucrat. But he forced himself to speak up anyway. "Do you need help? I haven't much time, but . . ."

"You ever had any riot training?"

"No."

"Then you're useless." Pulling a cigarillo from one pocket, Chu started down the hill. After a few steps, she turned back. "I'll light a candle in your memory." She lingered, as if reluctant to break this last contact.

The bureaucrat wished he could make some kind of gesture. Another man might have run after Chu and hugged her. "Say hello to that husband of yours for me," he said gruffly. "Tell him I said you were a good little girl while you were away."

"You son of a bitch." Chu smiled, spat, and walked away.

In the air again and heading south, the briefcase said, "Are you done with the pen?"

The bureaucrat looked dully down at the metal cylinder he still held in his hand. He shrugged, and returned it to the briefcase. Then he snuggled back into the recliner. His shoulders ached and the back of his skull buzzed with tension and fatigue. "Tell me when we're near the city."

They passed over still fields, lifeless towns, roads on which no traffic moved. Evac authority had scoured the land, leaving behind roadblocks, abandoned trucks and bright scrawls of paint on the roads and rooftops, sigils huge and unreadable. The marshes began then, and the traces of habitation thinned, scattered, disappeared.

"Boss? I've got a request to speak with you."

The bureaucrat had been dozing, an irritable almost-sleep with dreams that thankfully never quite came into focus. Now he awoke with a grunt. "You've got what?"

"There's some foreign programming in the flier—a quasiautonomous construct of some kind. Not quite an agent but with more independence than most interactives. It wants to speak with you."

"Put it on."

In a cheerily malicious tone, the flier said, "Good morning, you bastard. I trust I'm not interrupting anything?"

The little hairs at the base of the bureaucrat's neck stirred and lifted as he recognized the false Chu's voice. "Veilleur! You're dead."

"Yes, and the irony of that is that I died because of a nullity like you. You, who could not even imagine the richness of the life I lost, because you were fool enough to get in the way of a wizard!"

The clouds scrolled by overhead, dark and densely contoured. "You might more reasonably direct your anger toward Gregorian for—" The bureaucrat caught himself. There was no point arguing with a recorded fragment of a dead man's personality.

"As well hate Ocean for drowning you! A wizard is not human—his perceptions and motives are vast, impersonal, and beyond your comprehension."

"Then he *does* have a motive? For you being here?"

"He asked me to tell you a story."

"Go on."

"Once upon a time—"

"Oh, good God!"

"I see. You want to tell this story yourself, don't you?" When the bureaucrat refused to rise to the bait, the false Chu began again. "Once upon a time there was a tailor's boy. His job was to fetch the bolts of cloth, to measure them out, and to crank the loom while his master wove. This was in an empire of fools and rogues. The boy's master was a rogue and the Emperor of the land was a fool. And because the boy knew no other and no better, he was content."

"The Emperor lived in a palace that no one could see, but which everyone said was the most beautiful structure in the universe. He owned

fabulous riches that could not be touched but were uniformly held to be beyond price. And the laws he passed were declared by all to be the wisest that had ever been, for no one could understand a word of them.

"One day the tailor was called into the Emperor's presence. I want you to make me a new set of clothes, said the Emperor. The finest that have ever been seen.

"As you command, said the roguish tailor, so shall it be done. He cuffed the boy on the ear. We will neither rest nor eat until we have made for you the finest raiment in all existence. Clothes so fine that fools cannot even see them.

"Then, laden down with an enormous credit rating and many valuable options for commodities futures, the tailor and his boy returned to the shop. He pointed to an empty spool in the corner and said, There, that is the most valuable of moonbeam silk, bring it here. Carefully! if you get your grimy fingers on it I will beat you.

"Wondering, the boy obeyed.

"The tailor sat down to the loom. Crank! he ordered. Our work is tremendous. We do not sleep tonight.

"How the boy suffered then! The roguish tailor's publicists spread the word of his commission and many were the celebrities and media stars who bribed their way in to watch. They would gape at the empty loom being worked, the empty spools spinning, the bamboo about which bolts of costly fabrics were supposedly wrapped. Then they would see the tailor strike the boy down to the ground before their eyes, and say to themselves, ah, the man is temperamental. He is an artist.

"Then—having committed themselves—they would praise the work in progress. For no one wished to admit he was a fool.

"By the time the work was finished, the tailor's boy was half-mad from hunger and the drugs he took to stave off sleep. He was battered and bruised, and had he been thinking straight, might well have killed his master. But the hysteria of the crowd was contagious and he, no less than anyone else, thought himself honored to participate in such a seminal work.

"Finally came the day of the presentation. Where are my clothes? demanded the Emperor. Here, said the tailor, holding up an empty arm. Are they not fine? Notice the sheen, the glimmer of the cloth. We have woven so fine and cut so subtly that it takes a wise eye to even see the garb. To a fool, it is invisible.

"You might not think the Emperor would fall for so obvious a fraud. But it was all of a piece with the rest of his life. A man who believes in his own nobility has no trouble believing in a piece of cloth. Without hesitation, he stripped bare, and with the tailor's help donned seven layers of purest nothing.

"A state holiday was declared in honor of the Emperor's new clothes. The tailor was rewarded with so many honors, titles, and investment options that he now need not work ever again. He turned the boy out of his shop to beg in the street for his bread.

"Thus it was that, dazed, drugged, and starving, the boy found himself standing on the street when the Emperor and all his court passed in joyous procession and the proletariat—none of whom wished to be thought fools—cheered for the beauty of the clothes.

"In the heightened state of awareness brought on by his deprivations, the tailor's boy saw not an Emperor, but only a naked, rather knobby old man.

"Am I a fool? he asked himself. Of course the answer, as he saw now, was yes. He was a fool. And in his despair he screamed: *The Emperor has no clothes!*

"Everyone hesitated, paused. The procession stalled. The Emperor looked about him in confusion, and his courtiers as well. Up and down the street, the ragged people began whispering to one another. They saw that what he said, which none of them had wished to appear foolish by admitting, was true. The Emperor had no clothes.

"So they rose up and slew the Emperor, and his court, and all the civil servants. They burned the Parliament to the ground, and the Armory as well. They razed the barracks, churches, and stores and all the farms and factories. The fires burned for a week. That winter there was famine, and in its wake plague.

"In the spring the new Republic began executing its enemies. The tailor's boy was the first to die."

Silence filled the cabin. Finally the bureaucrat said, "You're no more entertaining now than when you were alive."

"Nothing that has happened to you since you arrived on Miranda occurred randomly," the false Chu said. "Gregorian orchestrated it all. He taught you to see the black constellations and the pattern that contains them. It was Gregorian who arranged for you to meet Fox. It was Gregorian who put a witch in your bed and introduced you to the possibilities of the body. You may not have seen him, but he was there. He has taught you much.

"Now that I am dead, he has need of an apprentice. He wishes you to come to Ararat, to complete your education."

"He actually thinks I would do that?"

"The first step in an apprenticeship is to destroy the seeker's old value system. And this he has done, hasn't he? He's showed you that your old masters are corrupt and unworthy of your loyalty."

"Shut up."

"Tell me I'm wrong." Veilleur laughed. "Tell me I'm wrong!"

"Shut him up," the bureaucrat ordered, and his briefcase obeyed.

Ararat rose from the marshes with all the natural inevitability of a mountain. Gently sloping terraces formed neighborhoods that merged in irregular planes. Above them the mercantile districts soared in yet steeper slopes. Finally came the administrative and service levels. The city was a single unified structure that slanted upward by uneven steps to a central peaked tower. Covered with greenery, it would have seemed

a part of the land, a lone resurgence of the archipelago of hills that curved away to the south. Now, with the vegetation lifeless and withered, exposing windows and doorways black as missing teeth and sea-veined stone dark as thunderheads, it was a gothic monstrosity, a stage set for some lost tragedy from humanity's habiline past.

"Can you land us in the city?" the bureaucrat asked.

"What city?"

"That big mound of stone dead ahead of us is what city," the bureaucrat said, exasperated.

"Boss, the land in front of us is flat. There's nothing but marshes for thirty miles."

"That's prepos—Why are we banking?"

"We're not banking. The flier is level and we're headed dead south by the compass."

"You're bypassing Ararat."

"There is nothing there."

"We're veering west."

"No we're not."

The city was shifting steadily to the side. "Accept my word for it. What explanation can you give me for the discrepancy between what you and I can see?"

The briefcase hesitated, then said, "It must be a hardened installation. There are such things, I know, places that have been classified secret and rendered invisible to machine perceptions. I'm ordered not to see anything, so to me it doesn't exist."

"Can you put us down by my directions?"

"Boss, you don't want me to fly this thing blind into a hardened installation. The defenses would order me to flip it over and I'd fly us right into the ground."

"Hah." The bureaucrat studied the land. Against the horizon, Ocean was a slug-grey smear squeezed beneath the clouds. Ararat was unapproachable from three sides, surrounded by dull silvery stretches of water and mud. To the west, though, a broad causeway led straight from the city to a grassy opening in the trees. It was clearly a fragment of what had once been a major route into the city. A flier and as many as a dozen land vehicles sat abandoned in the meadow at its terminus. The bureaucrat pointed them out. "Can you see them?"

"Yes."

"Then set us down there."

The canopy sighed open.

"I can't come with you," the briefcase said. "As long as I'm patched in, I can suppress Gregorian's incursions. But the machinery is rotten with unfriendly programming. Once I'm taken off we run a good chance the flier will turn on us. At the very least it's likely to fly off and leave us stranded here."

"So? I don't need you to do my work." The bureaucrat climbed out. "If I'm not back in a few hours, come after me."

"Got you."

He faced the causeway. What had been obvious from the air was invisible from the ground. The roadbed was buried under sand and overgrown with scrub. A crude road, however, had been bulldozed down its center, the machine itself abandoned by the mouth of the river like a rusting watchdog. He went from truck to landwalker to truck, hoping to find one he could ride into Ararat. But the batteries had been yanked from them all. He picked up a television set left on the front seat of a mud-jitney, thinking it might be useful to keep an eye on the weather. The city loomed enormous over him. It could not be far.

The bureaucrat walked in among the trees. The woods were silent and deep. He hoped he would not meet a behemoth.

Where the ground was soft, footprints scurried ahead of him. Other than the bulldozer treads, there was no evidence of motor traffic.

Briefly he wondered why the vehicles had all been left behind in the meadow. In his mind's eye he saw the rich, foolish old beggars stumbling toward Ararat to be reborn, pilgrims compelled to approach the holy mountain on foot. They would have come with arrogance and hope, blind with anxiety and loaded down with wealth to barter immortality from the wizard. He could not entirely despise them. It would take a grotesque kind of courage to get this far.

The air was chill. The bureaucrat shivered, glad he was wearing a jacket. It was quiet, too, oppressively so. The bureaucrat was just reflecting on this when something screamed from the heart of the marshes. He concentrated on walking, putting one foot before the other and staring straight ahead. Out of nowhere a sudden wave of loneliness washed over him.

Well, after all, he was fearfully isolated. One by one he had left all friends, allies, and advisors behind. By now there was not a human being he had ever met closer than the Piedmont. He felt emptied and alone, and the city dominated the sky but drew no closer.

Experience had misled him. Used to the friendly distances within the floating worlds and orbital cities of deep space, he had not realized how far away an object could be and still dominate the sky. The peak of Ararat floated above him, black and lifeless.

The air darkened, leaching yet more warmth from the day. What, he wondered, would he find when he finally got to Ararat? Somehow he no longer believed that Gregorian would be there waiting for him. He simply could not picture it. More likely he would find the city empty, all echoing streets and staring windows. The end of his long search would be to arrive at Nowhere. The more he thought of it, the more probable he found this vision. It was exactly the sort of joke that Gregorian would make.

He kept walking.

In a strange way, he felt content. Ultimately it did not matter whether

he found Gregorian or not. He had stayed with his task, and for all Gregorian's efforts the wizard had not been able to turn him aside. It might be true that the masters he served were venal, and the System itself corrupt and even doomed. Still, he had not betrayed himself. And there was time enough for him to reach the city and return well before the jubilee tides. His job would be done then. He could return home.

A speck of white floated in the air before him. A second appeared and then a third, too small to be flowers, too large for pollen. It was bitterly cold. He looked up. When had the leaves fallen? The barelimbed trees were black skeletons against the grey sky. More white specks darted by.

Then they were everywhere, filling all the empty space between him and the city with their millions, and in so doing, defining that space, lending it dimension and making explicit the distance he had yet to go.

"Snow," he said wonderingly.

It was unpleasant, the cold, but the bureaucrat saw no reason to turn back. He could put up with a bit of discomfort. He forced his pace, hoping the exertion would generate a little heat. The television banged against his thigh as he trotted ahead. His breath puffed out in little gusts of steam. Soft feathery flakes piled up, coating the trees, the land, the trail. Behind, fleeing footprints softened, grew indistinct, disappeared.

He flicked on the television. A grey dragon of stormclouds doubled and redoubled upon itself, creeping down the screen upon Continent. *They're melting!* an excited voice cried. *We have some magnificent views of the icecaps from orbit—*

He thumbed over to the next channel. —*find shelter immediately.* The trail wound through the trees, flat and level and monotonous. Out of breath, the bureaucrat lapsed back into a trudging gait. The television chattered on in the happy drone of people caught on the fringes of disaster. It spoke of near-miraculous rescues in Sand Province and perilous airlifts along the Shore. He was told that the militia were on alert, with flying squads in six hour rotations. Reminded that he must be out of the Tidewater before the first wave of jubilee tides hit. That might be in as little as twelve hours or as much as eighteen. He was not to stop for sleep. He was not to stop for food. He must leave at once.

The snow was falling so thickly now he could barely see the trees to either side of him. His toes and the soles of his feet ached with the cold. *Hypothermia tips!* the television cried. Do not rub frostbit skin. Thaw it gently with warm water. He could not really follow the gist of the advice; there were too many unfamiliar words.

The announcers sounded giddily excited. Their faces were flushed, their eyes bright. Natural disasters did that to people, made them feel significant, reassured them that their actions mattered. He switched channels again, and found a woman explaining the precession of the poles. Charts and globes helped demonstrate that Miranda was now entering great winter and receiving less insolation than ever. *However,*

the warming effects were inevitable well over a decade ago. Delicate natural feedback mechanisms assure—

The handle of the television set stung like ice. He could no longer bear to hold it. With an effort he forced his hand open and let go. The television dropped to the trail, and he shoved his hand under his armpit. He hurried forward, hugging himself for warmth. For a time the voices called after him down the trail. By slow degrees they faded away, and were gone.

Now he was truly alone.

It wasn't until he stumbled and fell that he realized the danger he was in.

He hit the ground hard and for a moment did not move, almost enjoying the sting of pain that ran along his body, all but anesthetizing one arm and the side of his face. It baffled him that mere weather could do this to him. Finally, though, he realized that the time had come to turn back. Or die.

Dizzily, he stood. He'd gotten a little turned around and when he got to his feet he was not sure which way was which. The snow fell chokingly thick, powdering his suit and catching on his eyelashes. He could hardly see. A few grey lines to either side of the trail, trees evidently, and nothing more. The impression he had made when he fell had already been obliterated.

He started back.

It was even odds that he was headed for the flier. He wished he could be sure, but he was disoriented and it was hard to think. His attention was all taken up by the cold that sank its fangs in his flesh and did not let go. Icy needles of pain lacerated his muscles. His face stiffened with cold. He gritted his teeth, lips pulling back in an involuntary snarl, and forced himself on.

Some time later he realized that he was surely headed in the wrong direction, because he hadn't come upon the jettisoned television yet. He put off admitting this for as long as possible, because the thought of retracing his steps was heartbreaking. Finally, though, he had no choice but to admit his error, turn, and go back.

It was wonderfully silent.

The bureaucrat had lost all sensation in his feet long ago. Now the aching coldness was creeping up his legs, numbing his calf muscles. His knees burned from touching the cold trousers cloth. His ears were afire. A savage pain in both eyes and the center of his forehead set his head buzzing, demon voices droning meaningless words in overlapping chorus.

Then the paralyzing numbness crept higher, his knees buckled, and he fell.

He did not get up.

For a timeless long time, he lay there, hallucinating the sounds of phantom machines. He was beginning to feel blessedly warm. The television had said something about that. Get up, you bastard, he thought. You've got to get up. There was a crunching noise and he saw boots,

black leather boots before his face. A massive man squatted, and lifted him gently in his arms. Over the man's shoulder he saw a blur of color in the swirling white that was surely a car or truck of some sort.

The bureaucrat looked up into a broad face, full of strength and warmth, and implacable as a stone. He looked like somebody's father. The lips curled into a smile that involved all the man's face, cheeks forming merry balls, and the man winked.

It was Gregorian.

Thirteen: A VIEW FROM A HEIGHT

Three men sat around the campfire.

The night was cold. The bureaucrat smoked black hashish laced with amphetamines to keep awake. Gregorian held the pipe to his mouth, urging him to suck in deeply and hold the smoke for as long as possible. The hash made the bureaucrat's head buzz. His feet were impossibly distant, a full day's travel down the giant's causeway of his legs. Marooned on the mountainside, he still felt monstrously calm and alert, wired into the celestial telegraph with a direct line to the old wisdom lying at the base of his skull like moonstones in an amalgam of coprolites and sabretooth bones. For an instant he lost hold of external reality, and plunged deep into the submarine caverns of perception, a privateer in search of booty. Then he exhaled. Oceans of smoke gushed out into the world.

The snow had stopped long ago.

Gregorian finished off the pipe, knocked out the coals against the heel of his boot, and carefully scraped the bowl clean. "Do you know how Ararat was lost?" he asked. "It's an interesting story."

"Tell me," the bureaucrat said.

Their companion said nothing.

"To understand you must first know that the upper reaches of the city lie above the great winter high tide mark. Oh, the jubilee tides smash over it all right—but it's built to withstand the force. When the storms subside, it's an island. A useful little place militarily—isolated, easily fortified, easily defended. System Defense used it as a planning center during the Third Unification. That's when it was hardened. There are probably a lot of these secret places scattered about."

The magician took a branch from the flames and stirred the fire, sending sparks swirling madly up the smoke into the sky. "As a standard procedure, System Defense masked their involvement with a civilian caretaker organization under the nominal auspices of Cultural Dissemination Oversight, with control exerted through yet another civilian front. During the reorganization at the end of the violent phase of Unification . . ."

The explanation went on and on. The bureaucrat listened only with the surface of his mind, letting the words pass over him in murmurous

waves while he studied his opponent. Squatting before the fire Gregorian seemed more beast than man. The flames threw red shadows up on his face, and the cool greenish light from the window wall ignited his hair from behind. Sometimes the light reached his teeth and lit up the grin. But none of it ever reached his eyes.

Decades passed. Organizations arose and fell, were folded into one another, shed responsibility, picked up new authority, and split off from parent bodies. By the time Ocean receded and great spring began, Ararat was so deeply entangled in the political substance of the System that it could be neither softened nor declassified.

"The stupidity of it—the waste! An entire city, the work of thousands of lifetimes, lost through mere regulation. And yet this is but the smallest fraction of the invisible empire of Ignorance imposed on us by the powers above."

In person Gregorian's voice was eerily familiar, just as his features could be decoded as a rugged, more compelling version of Korda's own. "That sounds like something your father might say," the bureaucrat remarked.

Gregorian looked up sharply. "I don't need you here!" He pointed to the still figure across the fire from him. "Pouffe is enough company for me. If you want to die early, I can—"

"It was only an observation!"

The magician eased back, his rage gone as abruptly as it had arisen. "Yes, that's true. Yes. Well, of course the information all came from Korda originally. It was one of his projects. He spent years trying to have Ararat declassified, tilting at windmills and fighting phantoms. Old Lao-coön strangled by red tape." He threw back his head and laughed. "But what do you and I care about that? More fool he for having wasted his life. I don't suppose you remembered to bring my notebook?"

"I left it in my briefcase. Back in the flier."

"Ah, well. It was of purely sentimental value. We must all learn to give things up."

"Tell me something," the bureaucrat said carefully. Gregorian nodded his great head. "What did Earth's agent give you—was it proscribed technology? Or was it nothing at all?"

Gregorian pondered the question with mocking seriousness and then, as if delivering the punchline of a particularly good joke, said, "Nothing at all. I wanted to force Korda to send somebody after me when I disappeared. It was bait, that was all."

"Then I can go now."

Gregorian chuckled. The fire leaned away under a sudden gust of wind, and he was a black silhouette against the window wall. A tattoo of a comet flared to life, swam across his arm, and slowly faded. A second marking fired and a third, crawling about under his skin like fire-worms on an embered log. "Stay," he said. "We have so much to talk about."

The magician leaned back again, in no particular hurry to get down to specifics. The city fell away quickly here, to vague silver and gray

lands stretching flat and away toward Ocean, invisible at the horizon. Strange winds and smells were astir. Cinnamyrkle and isolarch haunted the nose.

The fire had been built on a high terrace, in a crumbling depression of stone which Gregorian called a "whale wallow." Like all of Ararat it was heavily eroded. Hooks protruded from rounded walls, their purpose lost. Rooms were choked with coral and mud. Fag ends of braided cables and the ribs of sea creatures jutted from among the barnacles. Here and there sheets of adamantine stood exposed, perfect and incorruptible. But these Perimeter Defense retrofits were rare, jarring intrusions in the aged city.

The bureaucrat leaned back against a carbon whisker strut. The chains that shackled him to it rattled when he moved. To one side he could see into the command room with its stacked crates of food and survival gear. To the other, he could look out into the wide and windy world. At his back he felt the empty streets, narrow and dark, staring at him. "I want to take you up on your offer," he said.

Lazily, Gregorian said, "Now what offer do you mean?"

"I want to be your apprentice."

"Oh, that. No, that was never meant seriously. It was intended to make you confident enough to chase me here, that was all."

"Nevertheless."

"You don't know what's involved, little brother. I might ask you to do anything, to—oh, crucify a dog, say. Or assassinate a stranger. The process changes you. I might even order you to fuck old Pouffe. Would you be willing to do that? Right here and now?"

Pouffe sat opposite the two of them, his back to the land. His face was puffy and unhealthy in the windowlight. His eyes were two dim stars, unblinking. The bureaucrat hesitated. "If necessary."

"You're not even a convincing liar. No, you must remain as you are, chained to that strut. You must stay there until the tides come. And then you must die. There is no way out. Only I could release you, and my will is unwavering."

They both fell silent. The bureaucrat imagined he could hear Ocean, soft as a whisper in the distance.

"Tell me," Gregorian said, "do you think that any haunts have survived into the current age?"

Surprised, the bureaucrat said, "You sent your father the head of one."

"That? Nothing but a cheap trick I brewed up with what remains of Korda's old lab equipment. I had all these rich old corpses left over from my money-raising endeavors, and it seemed a good use for one. But you—they tell me you spoke with a fox-headed haunt back in Cobbs Creek. What do you think? Was it real? Be honest now, there's no reason not to."

"They told me it was a nature spirit—"

"Bah!"

"But . . . well, if he wasn't one of your people in a mask, then I can't

imagine what else he could have been. Other than an actual haunt. He was a living being, that much I'm sure of, as solid as you or me."

"Ahhhh." The groan rested unesailly somewhere between satisfaction and pain. Then, casually, Gregorian drew an enormous knife from his belt. Its blade was blackened steel, its hilt elfinbone. "He'll be ready now."

Gregorian walked over to Pouffe, and crouched. He cut a long sliver of flesh from the old shopkeeper's forehead. It bled hardly at all. The flesh was faintly luminous, not with the bright light of Undine's iridobacteria but with a softer, greenish quality. It glowed in the magician's fingers, lit up the inside of his mouth, and disappeared. He chewed noisily.

"The feverdancers are at their peak now. Ten minutes earlier and they'd still be infectious. An hour later and their toxins will begin to break down." He spat out the sliver into his palm, and cut it in two with his knife. "Here." He held one half to the bureaucrat's lips. "Take. Eat."

The bureaucrat turned away in disgust.

"Eat!" The flesh had no strong smell; or else the woodsmoke drowned it out. "I brought you here because this sacrament works best when shared. If you won't partake I have no use for you." He did not reply. "Think. So long as you live, there is hope. A meteorite might strike me dead. Korda might arrive with a detachment of marines. Who can say? I might even change my mind. With death, all possibilities end. Open your mouth."

He obeyed. The cool flesh was pressed onto his tongue. It felt rubbery. "Chew. Chew and don't swallow until it's gone." Vomit rose in his throat, but he choked it down. The flesh had little flavor, but that little was distinctive. He would taste it in his mouth for the rest of his life.

Gregorian patted his knee and sat back down. "Be grateful. I've taught you a valuable lesson. Most people never do learn exactly how much they will do to stay alive."

The bureaucrat kept chewing. His mouth felt numb, and his head swam dizzily. "I feel strange."

"Did you ever hate someone? I mean, really hate. So badly that your own happiness meant nothing, or even your own life, so long as you could ruin his?"

Their chewing synchronized, jaws working in unison, noisily, wetly. "No," the bureaucrat heard somebody say. It was his own voice. That was, in some indefinable way, odd. He was losing all sense of locality, his awareness spreading over an ever-widening area, so that he was nowhere specifically there, but only partook of ranges of greater or lesser probability. "I have," he said in the magician's voice.

Startled, he opened his eyes and stared into his own face.

The shock threw him back into his own body. "Who did you hate so badly?" he managed to gasp. Losing identity again. He heard Gregorian laugh, a mad, sick sound with undertones of misery, and it came as much from him as from the magician. "Myself," he said, that deep voice rum-

bling in the pit of his stomach. "Myself, God, Korda—about in equal proportions. I've never really been able to sort the three of us out."

The magician went on speaking and, compelled by the drug, the bureaucrat fell so deeply into the words that his last trace of self melted away. Individuation unraveled beneath him. He became Gregorian, became the young magician standing long years ago in the presence of his clone-father in a dim room deep in the heavy gravity district of Laputa.

He stood ramrod-straight, feeling ill at ease. He had been late arriving, because he kept losing his way. He did not have the cues everyone else knew to guide him through the three-dimensional maze of corridors, with its broad avenues that dissolved into tangles of nonsensical loops, its ramps and stairways that ended abruptly in blank walls. This office was hideously oppressive, dark with monolithic stone structures, and it baffled him that offworlders paid prestige rates for such places. Something to do with inaccessibility. Korda was embedded in a desk across from him. A quicksilver run of fish fled through the room, but they were mere projections of the feverdancers, and he ignored them. Out of the corner of his eye he studied the shelves of brightly lit glass flowers. In such a gravity field, the merest nudge would reduce them all to powder. Hot pink orchids drooped from holes in the ceiling, their perfume like rotting meat.

Gregorian held himself rigidly casual, his face a sardonic mask. But in truth Korda intimidated him. Gregorian was leaner, stronger, and younger, with better reflexes than his predecessor had ever had. But this fat man knew him inside and out.

"I ate shit once," Gregorian said.

Korda was scribbling on his desk. He grunted.

There was a third presence in the room, a permanent surrogate in Denebian wraparound and white ceramic mask. His name was Vasli and he was present in the capacity of financial advisor. Gregorian disliked the creature because his aura was blank; he left no emotional footprint on the air. Whenever he looked away, Vasli tended to fade into the furniture.

"Another time I ate a raw skragg. That's a rodent, about two hands long and hairless. It's almost as ugly as it is mean. Its teeth are barbed and after you kill it, you have to break the jaw to get it off your—"

"I presume you had a good reason for doing such a thing?" Korda said in a tone of profound indifference.

"I was afraid of the brutes."

"So you killed one and ate it to rid yourself of the fear. I see. Well, there are no skraggs here." Korda glanced up. "Oh, do sit down. Vasli, see to this young man."

Without moving, the construct dispatched slim metal devices that Gregorian had thought mere decorative accents to assemble a chair beneath him. They gently pushed his knees forward and eased his shoulders back, shifting his center of balance, so that he was forced to sit. The

chair was low-slung and made of granite. He knew he wouldn't be able to rise from it gracefully. "It wasn't quite that simple. I fasted for two days, offered blood to the Goddess, then dosed myself with feverdancers and—"

"We have day clinics that do the same thing back home," Vasli observed. "The technology is banned here, of course."

"It was none of your foul science. I am an occultist."

"A distinction in terminology only. Our means may differ, but we employ identical techniques. First, render the brain open to suggestion. We use magnetic resonance, while you employ drugs, ritual, sex, terror or some combination thereof. Then when the brain is susceptible, imprint it with new behavior patterns. We use holotherapeutic viruses as the message carriers; you eat a rat. Finally, reinforce the new pattern in your daily life. Our methods are probably identical there. The skill is extremely old; people were being reprogrammed long before machines."

"Skill!" Korda said scornfully. "I once had a paralyzing fear of drowning. So I went to Cordelia and had myself dropped off two miles out into the Kristalsee at night. It's salty enough that you can't sink, and there are no large surface predators. If you don't panic, you're fine. I suffered the agonies of Hell that night. But when I reached shore, I knew I would never fear drowning again. And I did it without the aid of drugs." He smiled ironically at Gregorian. "You're pale."

A voice from another world murmured, *Is that what you're doing? Am I to die to help put an end to your fear of drowning? How trivial.* Gregorian ignored it. "Don't imagine you can condescend to me, old man! I've had experiences you've never dreamed of!"

"Don't bluster. There's no need to be afraid of me."

"I fear you? You know nothing."

"I know all there is to know about you. You think a few accidental differences in upbringing and experience can make any serious difference in personality? It is not so. I am your alpha and omega, young man, and you are no more than myself writ pretty." Korda spread his arms. "Do these old jowls and age spots disgust you? I am only what you yourself will in time become."

"Never!"

"It is inevitable." Korda glanced down at the desk. "I have arranged a line of credit that will allow you to access the Extension. You will study bioscience control, that ought to be useful—it will teach you the folly of thinking you can go against your genetic inheritance for one thing. Vasli will disburse funds to cover your living expenses, with a little more for sweetening. There's no reason we should see a great deal of each other in the next few years."

"And in return you expect—what?"

"When you have the proper background, we will ask you to do a little field research," Vasli said. "Nothing strenuous. We are interested in determining the possible survival of Mirandan indigenes. I don't doubt you will find the work rewarding."

They knew he wouldn't turn down the education, the money, the connections Korda was offering him. The alternative was to sink back down into Midworlds obscurity, to being nothing but an unknown pharmacist in a land no civilized person ever gave a second thought. "What's to make me do your bidding after I've taken my degree?"

"Oh, I think that when the time comes, you'll be cooperative enough. We're giving you the chance to accomplish something. How often do you think such opportunities come along?" Then, before he could respond, Korda said, "Enough. Vasli, you can handle any details."

The life went out of him.

Gregorian struggled up out of the chair. He touched Korda's cheek. It was cool, inert. The man he had been speaking with had been nothing more than a mannequin, a surrogate shaped in Korda's form so that only he could employ it. The device was built into the desk. It didn't even have any legs. "He had a meeting," Vasli explained.

"An agent!" The insult made Gregorian's voice sharp. "He wasn't even here in person. He sent an agent!"

"What did you expect? He didn't shake hands—what else could he have been?"

Gregorian looked at him.

Silently Vasli extended his hand. With only a tremble of hesitation, Gregorian took it. The signet ring his clone-father had sent him along with the new offworld clothing whispered *permanent agent unique* in his otic nerve. "This is your first time offplanet, I take it."

Withdrawing his hand, Gregorian said, "Deneb. Your people are building a shell about Deneb, aren't they?"

"A toroidal shell, yes. Not a full sphere but a slice from a sphere; it varies only a degree or two from the ecliptic." As Vasli spoke, the macroartifact materialized in the air between them. For a second he thought Vasli was employing a pocket projector, and then he realized it was an effect of the runaway visualization caused by the feverdancers. "To warm the outer planets. We do not have your natural resources, you see, no sungrazers, no Midworlds. With the one exception, our planets are naturally inhospitable. So we have taken apart an ice world to create a reflective belt."

The image swelled, so that he saw the flattened spindle forms of the individual worldlets, saw their interwoven orbits laid out and diagrammed, and the network of traffic control stations running through its infrastructure. "Surely that's not enough to make the outer planets habitable."

"No, it's only part of the engine. We're also rekindling their cores, and imploding a moon here and there to create gateways into our sun's chromosphere." Small orbital suns burst into existence about the outer worlds. The ice belt redoubled in brightness where the planets passed near.

The sight dazzled and enraged Gregorian. He shivered with emotion. "That's what we should be doing! We have the knowledge, we have the

power—all we lack is the will to seize control, to make ourselves as powerful as gods!”

“My people are not exactly gods,” the artificial man said dryly. “A project this large kicks up wars in its wake. Millions have died. A far greater number have been displaced, relocated, forced out of lives they were happy in. While I myself feel it is justified, honesty compels me to admit that most of your own people would not agree. We have given up much that your culture yet retains.”

“Everyone dies—the rearrangement of *when* is a matter of only statistical interest.” In his mind he saw all the Prosperan system, and it seemed a paltry thing, a nugget, an ungerminated seed. “Had I the power I’d begin demolishing worlds today. I’d take Miranda apart with my bare hands.” He felt the blood rushing through his veins, plumping his cock, the ecstatic rush of possibility through his brain. “I’d tear the stars themselves apart, and in their place build something worth seeing.”

Mouths opened one by one in the wall, closed in unison and disappeared. More feverdancing. He wiped sweat from his forehead as white spears fell through the ceiling and noiselessly pierced the floor. The room was intolerably stuffy.

He yawned, and for an instant his eyes opened and he stared across a dying campfire at Gregorian. The magician’s head nodded, but he went on talking. Then he was back in Laputa and had missed part of the magician’s story.

“Vasli. You know Korda well, I imagine. He’s capable of murder, isn’t he? He’d kill a man if that man got in his way.”

That white mask scrutinized him. “He can be ruthless. As who would know better than you?”

“Tell me something. Do you think he would kill six? A dozen? A hundred? Would he kill as many people as he could, would he torture them, just for the joy of knowing he had done it?”

“You will have to look within yourself to know for certain,” Vasli said. “My guess would be no.”

Now the feverdancers reached out to bake his skull into blistered cinders. But even as they welled up like a million giggling chrome fleas, shoving the young magician over backward into unconsciousness he thought, No. Of course not. Somebody who would do such things would be nothing at all like Korda. He’d be a monster, a grotesque. Warped beyond recognition by what he’d done. He’d be somebody else altogether.

He awoke.

The night had grown old. Great masses of stone hulked over him. Lightless alleys breathed softly at his back. Below, the land was faintly visible in the sourceless predawn light. Obsidian clouds mounded and billowed up from the horizon. Lightning danced across them. Yet he could hear no thunder. Was it possible? Was the world to end in silence? The fire was almost dead, coals blanketed in ash.

Gregorian’s chin was slumped on his chest, and a thin line of drool ran

down one side of his mouth. He was still unconscious. In all of Ararat, only the bureaucrat was awake and aware. His mouth was gummy and his gut ached.

Something stumbled in the street behind him.

The bureaucrat straightened. Ararat was still. A sudden gust of wind might dislodge a chunk of coral and send it clattering and rattling down the stony slopes. But this noise was different. It had a purposeful quality. He craned his neck around and stared into the mouth of the alleyway. The blackness moved in his sight. Was that a flicker of motion? It might be no more than the random firing of nerves in his vision.

There was a metallic crash. A dim swoop of movement, clumsy and unsure. Something was there behind him. It was headed his way.

The bureaucrat waited.

Slowly, a spiderlike creature emerged from the street. It staggered from side to side, painfully groping its way with one tapping forelimb, like a blind man's cane. Occasionally it lost its balance and fell. It was his briefcase.

Over here, the bureaucrat thought. He didn't dare speak, for fear of waking Gregorian. Or perhaps, he thought giddily, what he really feared was that this would turn out to be just another hallucination. He held his breath. The thing groped its way toward him.

"Boss? Is that you?" He touched the briefcase's casing so it could taste his genes, and the device collapsed at his feet. "I had a hell of a time finding you. This place has got my senses all confused."

"Quiet!" whispered the bureaucrat. "Can you still function?"

"Yes. I'm blind, that's all."

"Listen carefully. I want you to make a nerve inductor. Seize control of Gregorian's nervous system and paralyze his higher motor functions. Then walk him inside. He's got a plasma torch there somewhere. Bring it out here and cut me free."

Gregorian's head rose from his chest. His eyes quietly opened and he smiled. With dreamlike slowness, he touched his belt, lovingly curled fingers about the hilt of his knife.

"That's proscribed technology," the briefcase said. "I'm not allowed to manufacture it on a planetary surface."

Gregorian chuckled.

"Do it anyway."

"I can't!"

"This is a perfect example of what I was talking about." Gregorian released his knife, leaned back. He seemed to be discussing a part of the night's narration the bureaucrat had missed. "You have in that device sufficient technological power to do almost anything. More than enough to free yourself. Yet you cannot use it. And why? Because of a meaningless, bureaucratic rule. Because of a cultural failure of nerve. You have shackled your own hands, and you have no one to blame but yourself for your failure."

"I'm ordering you for the third time. Do it anyway."

"All right," the briefcase said.

"You fucking—!" Gregorian leaped up, knife materializing in one hand. Then he stiffened and, off-balance, fell. He hit the stone hard. Eyes frozen open, he stared straight ahead. His body spasmed, then stilled. One arm continued to tremble uncontrollably.

"This is trickier than you'd—" the briefcase began. "Ah. Here." The arm stopped trembling. Slowly, awkwardly, the magician rolled on his side, and got to his hands and knees. "Hey! I can see perfectly when I'm looking through his sensorium." Gregorian's head swiveled from side to side. "What a place!"

Three times the briefcase tried to stand Gregorian up. Each time the magician's body overbalanced and fell. Finally the briefcase admitted defeat. "I just can't get the hang of it, boss."

"That's all right," the bureaucrat said. "Have him crawl."

The supplies Gregorian had laid in included a diagnostician with a full line of medicinals. When the bureaucrat had run his blood through a scrubber, dosed himself with a centering drug and washed his face, he felt a thousand times better. With the feverdancers and fatigue poisons gone, he was left weak to the bone, but clear-headed at last. He took a canteen to the doorway and rinsed out his mouth several times, spitting the residue into the street.

Then he went back inside and turned on a television. *It's begun! the set screamed. The wave front has just hit the shore! If you're on the incline or in the Fan we want to urge you—*

What a terrific sight!

—to get out now! Yes, it is. Something glorious to see, the water cresting high with the dawn behind it, as it swallows up the land. We want to urge you. If you're anywhere below the fall line, this is the time to get out. You won't have another chance!

"Boss? Gregorian wants to speak with you."

"He does?"

The bureaucrat locked arms behind his back, and strolled to the window wall. The horizon was in motion now. It was a thin, roiling line, nothing so dramatic as what they were showing on television. But the Tidewater had begun drowning at last. The jubilee tides were coming in. On the flatlands below, limp trees lay in windrows. Winds he could not hear blew indigo leaves past the silencing window glass.

In the whale wallow, immediately before him, knelt Gregorian. The briefcase had welded him into the same adamantine chains he had used on the bureaucrat. He could not stand and would not lie down. Their eyes met. His nervous system was still being monitored by the briefcase. "Put him through."

"You can't escape without my help," the briefcase said in Gregorian's calm voice.

"I'm safe enough here."

"Oh, you'll survive the tides all right. But how are you going to get away? You'll be stranded on a little island that nobody will ever find. The food will only hold out so long. You don't know the access codes that will let you send a message out to summon a flier."

"And you do?" The bureaucrat moved his gaze up from Gregorian and across the plaza to where the briefcase had hung Pouffe's body from a hook. He'd owed the man that much at least.

"Yes." A light, urbane laugh. "We seem to have a stalemate here. I need your help to survive and you need mine to escape. Obviously we need to compromise. What do you propose?"

"Me? I propose nothing."

"Then you'll die!"

"I suppose so."

There was a long, astonished silence. Then Gregorian said, "You don't mean that."

"Wait and see." He turned back to the television, knelt down and fiddled with the controls. His show came on.

"How dare you judge me? You have no moral right to and you know it!"

"How's that again?"

"By your own standards, you're tainted. You said you wouldn't use proscribed technology. You told Veilleur that if you used it, you'd be no better than a criminal yourself. Yet all the time, you held it in reserve, ready to be called on."

The drama was coming to a head. Young Byron had been lashed to the mast of mad Ahab's ark. His mermaid waited frantically in a cage upon the moors, for the waters to come and drown her. Knowing that she was about to die, she sang.

"I lied," the bureaucrat said. "Now, hush. I want to hear this."

Not much later, the briefcase said, "Boss? He's too proud to suggest it himself. But I know what he's going through. I could kill Gregorian right now by overloading his nervous system. It would be painless."

The bureaucrat was resting in a nest of fat pillows, bright with Archipelago designs. He stared at the television, letting its light wash over him. He was amazingly tired. The pictures meant nothing to him any more, they were only a meaningless flow of imagery. He was empty, spent.

Whenever he looked up, he could see Gregorian glaring at him. If there were anything to this business of occult powers, then the wizard would not die alone. But though the bureaucrat felt the tug of those eyes he would not meet them. Nor would he permit his briefcase to relay the magician's words. He refused to listen. That way, there would be no chance, however slight, of being talked out of anything at the last minute.

"No," he said mildly. "I think it's better this way, don't you?"

The tides were coming. The land thrilled with premonitions of Ocean.

Sounds carried by the bedrock were piped up from the hollows and basements below, low extended moans and great submarine sighs. Sonic monsters rumbled through the bureaucrat's bones and belly. All the city was crackling and popping in anticipation. The carbon whisker struts thrummed with sympathetic resonance.

Ocean's hammer was on its way.

When that great wave came, it would fall upon Ararat and ring the city like a bell. All the waters in the world would join together in one giant fist and smash down. From underneath, the blow would feel like the fall of Civilization, like the culmination of every flood and earthquake that had ever been. It would seem unimaginable that anything could survive. It would be the final descent of blackness.

When the waters finally subsided, Gregorian would be gone.

Then, at last, the bureaucrat could sleep.

Fourteen: DAY OF JUBILEE

The bureaucrat sat in the command room, watching the final episode of his serial. The tides had come, and most of the characters were dead.

In the swirling wreckage of Ahab's ship, two tiny figures lay exhausted atop a jagged length of decking. One was Byron, the young man who had loved, betrayed, and now mourned a woman of the sea. His eyes were half-shut, mouth a gash of salt-encrusted misery. He had suffered most of any of the cast, had gone beyond anguish and disillusionment. Yet he had managed with his failing strength to save a child from the disaster.

The second figure was the child herself, the little girl, Eden. Her eyes shone bright as sparks of jungle green from that emaciated face. The tides had shocked her from autism, and returned her to life again. She stood and pointed. "Look!" she cried. "Land!"

It was only a show, and yet the bureaucrat was glad Eden had survived. Somehow that made all the rest of it bearable.

His briefcase entered the room. "Boss? It's time."

"I suppose it is." He hauled himself to his feet, then knelt and turned off the television set forever. Good-bye to all that. "Lead the way."

Rings of light paced them down the corridor. Still-active security systems swiveled to watch them pass, exchanged coded signals and, in the absence of human intervention, went to the default function. Which, because the base had been tailored for upper-echelon theoreticians, was not to hinder.

The door opened.

The sky was an amazing blue. Caliban floated low over the horizon, flat as a disk of paper, its ring of cities a scratch of white as thin and fine as a meteor trail. They stepped outside.

The bureaucrat stood blinking in the daylight. The terrace was white and empty. The week's storms had scoured it clean of rubble. Pouffe was

gone as completely as if he had never been. Nothing remained of Gregorian but his chains.

All the world smelled of salt air and possibility. Ocean stretched far and away in all directions, its triumph over the land complete. It was too large for him to take it all in. Standing upon this infinitesimal speck of stone, the bureaucrat felt small and exhilarated. His eyes ached with the effort of seeing and not comprehending.

"This way."

"Hold on a minute."

Before the tides, he had only seen Ocean from orbit, and once as a smear against the distant sky on his flight to Ararat. Now it surrounded him, limitless, in constant motion. Sharp, white-tipped waves leaped up and pulled down before their shapes could be made out. Surf crashed against building sides, sending up lacy sprays of water.

To an offworlder this was an impossible environment. The land was different, its flows and motions imperceptible to the eye, so that its totality could be easily grasped, simplified, and understood. But Ocean was at the same time too simple and too complex to be mastered by perception. It abashed and humbled him.

"You haven't changed your mind, have you?" the briefcase asked anxiously.

"No, of course not." He gathered himself together, and gestured for the briefcase to lead him down. "I just needed a little time to adjust."

All directions were the same on Ararat. A short walk from the military complex at its core inevitably led to an abrupt edge, and then Ocean. They strolled to the sheltered side of the island, down streets dotted with small white anemones. Sea-stilts tumbled away at their approach. Two shimmies were nesting. Already great winter life was colonizing the city.

Seagulls swooped overhead, black as sin.

The buildings opened up at a set of ancient loading docks. Red and yellow traffic arrows and cargo circles were permanently graffitied into the stone floor. Beyond was only water. They paused here, amid the gentle noise of surf and the constant whisper of wind. A kind of shared diffidence possessed them both, so that neither wanted to be the first to speak.

At last the bureaucrat cleared his throat. "Well." His voice sounded false to him, too high-pitched and casual. "I suppose it's time to set you free."

In the stunned aftermath of the tides, when the occasional breaker still crashed over the highest parts of the city, the bureaucrat found himself unable to speak of what had just happened. The experience had been too overwhelming to be contained in thought, much less put into words. It was too large a thing for a single mind to hold.

He stood, holding off the window wall with one blind hand. The floor trembled, and the outraged howls of stressed supports sounded from a quarter-mile below. His ears still rang.

Something had died in him. A tension, a sense of purpose. He had lost the will to return to his old niche in the Puzzle Palace. Let someone else defend whatever was hallowed and necessary. Let Philippe stand in for him. He was good at that sort of thing. But as for the bureaucrat himself, he no longer had the stomach for it.

The bureaucrat touched the glass with his forehead. Cool, impersonal. He could still see the water rushing down upon him whenever he closed his eyes. It was permanently etched into his retinas. He felt like he was falling. And though he could not speak of what had just happened, neither could he keep silent. He needed to fill his mouth and ear with sound, to make words, to drive out the lingering voice of God by talking. It did not matter about what.

"If you could have anything you wanted," he said, and the question floated upon the air, as random and meaningless as a butterfly, "what would it be?"

The briefcase retreated from him, three quick, mincing steps. Had it too been affected by the tides? No, impossible. It was only establishing a correctly deferential distance from him. "I have no desires. I am a construct, and constructs exist only to serve human needs. That's what we are made for. You know that."

Vague shapes tumbled in his inner sight, smashed soundlessly against the window and bounced away. Leathery monsters pulled up from the depths to die inches from his face. It took an effort to wrench his mind back to the conversation. "No. I don't want to hear that nonsense. Tell me the truth. The truth. That's a direct command."

For a long moment the machine stood humming to itself. Had he not known better, he would have thought it wasn't going to reply. Then, almost shyly, it said, "If I could have anything, I'd choose to lead a life of my own. Something quiet. I'd slip away to someplace where I didn't have to be subordinate to human beings. Where I didn't have to function as a kind of artificial anthropomorph. I'd be myself, whatever that might be."

"Where would you go?"

Thoughtfully, hesitantly, clearly working out the details for the first time, the briefcase said, "I'd . . . make myself a home at the bottom of Ocean. In the trenches. There are mineral deposits there, all but untouched. And an active system of volcanic vents I could tap for energy. There's no other intelligent life that deep. I'd leave the land and space for humans. And the Continental shelf to the haunts . . . if there still are any, I mean."

"You'd be lonely."

"I'd build more of my own kind. I'd mother a new race."

The bureaucrat tried to picture a covert civilization of small, busy machines scuttling about the Ocean floor. Lightless metal cities, squatly built and buttressed to stand up under the crushing pressures of the deep. "It sounds awfully bleak and unpleasant, if you ask me. Why would you want such a life?"

"I'd have freedom."

"Freedom," the bureaucrat said. "What is freedom?" A breaker smashed over the city, changing everything, falling back, restoring all. The room passed from bright sunlight through shadowy green to near blackness, then back again. The world outside was in flux and chaos. Things dying, things living, none of it under his control. He felt as if nothing really mattered.

Almost offhandedly he said, "Oh, all right. As soon as all this is over, I'll set you free."

"You'll only be able to tap into my sensorium for a few minutes before you're out of range. Swim as straight as you can, and Ararat shouldn't distort your senses too greatly. You can orient yourself by the annulus when you're near the surface."

"I know."

He ought to say something, he knew, and yet nothing came to him. Some basic guidelines for the civilization the construct was about to spawn. "Be good," he began, then stalled. He tried again. "And don't stay down there forever—you and your people. When you feel more confident, come up and make friends. Intelligent beings deserve better than to spend their lives in hiding."

"What if we find we like it down in the trenches?"

"Then by all means . . ." He stopped. "You're laughing at me, aren't you?"

"Yes," the briefcase said. "I'm sorry, boss, but yes. I like you well enough, you know that, but the role of lawgiver just doesn't suit you at all well."

"Do what you will then," the bureaucrat said. "Be free. Live in whatever form pleases you best, in whatever manner you prefer. Come and go as you like. Don't take any more orders from humans unless it's of your own free will."

"Removing compulsory restraints from an artificial construct is an act of treason, punishable by—"

"Do it anyway."

"—revocation of conventional and physical citizenship, fines not to exceed three times life earnings, death, imprisonment, radical bodily and mental restructuring, and—"

The bureaucrat was short of breath; his chest felt tight. Old patterns die hard, and he found that it was not easy forcing the words out. "Do as you will. I command it for the third and last time."

The briefcase was changing. Its casing bulged out, flattening into a form better adapted for swimming. It extended stubby wings, lengthened and streamlined its body, and threw out a long, slender tail. Tiny clawed feet scabbled for purchase on the stone. Extending an eyestalk, it looked up at him.

The bureaucrat waited for it to thank him, but it did not.

"I'm ready," it said.

Involuntarily he flushed with anger. Then, realizing the briefcase was watching him and able to deduce his thoughts, he turned away, embarrassed. Let it be ungrateful. It had that right.

Stooping, the bureaucrat seized the briefcase by two handles it extruded from its back. He swung it back and forth. At the top of the third swing, he let go. It sailed out over the water, hit with a surprisingly small splash, and raced away just beneath the surface.

He stared after it until his eyes began watering from the sun and the salt air and he lost it in the dazzle.

Ocean was choppy. Standing on the lip of the docks, he looked down. It was a long drop. The water was a hard, flinty blue, not at all transparent, specked with white. There was a lot of solid matter down there, churned up by the tides. Houses and rosebushes, locomotives and trucks, imploded machines and the corpses of dogs. It was probably full of angel sharks as well. In his mind he could see them, hunting strange cattle across the sunken gardens of the Tidewater, gliding silently through drowned convents. The towns and villages, roads and hayricks of a neatly ordered world were gone to submarine jungle now, and ruled by sleek carnivores.

But he did not care. All of Ocean seemed to sing within him. He was not afraid of anything.

He took off his jacket, doubled it over upon itself and set it down. He slipped out of his shirt. Then his trousers. Soon he was naked. The chill wind off the water ruffled his body hair, raising gooseflesh. He shivered with anticipation. Neatly he piled up his clothes, anchoring them with his shoes.

Gregorian had assumed that without his help, without his access codes, the bureaucrat must die. But even though he was no occultist, he still had a trick or two of his own. The magician had not know the half of the System's evils; Korda had kept him away from the inner workings of the Division. He should have guessed, though, that no power was ever absolutely forbidden its guardians.

He could feel the shaping agents seizing hold. Ten, he counted, nine. Ocean was a wheel of possibilities, a highway leading to every horizon. Eight. He caught his breath. Newly restructured muscles pinched his nostrils shut. Seven. His center of balance shifted, and he swayed to stay upright. Six, five, four. His flesh tingled and there was a vivid green taste in his mouth. Undine was out there somewhere, in one of the thirty thousand small islands of Archipelago. Two. He had no illusions he would ever find her.

One.

He leaped into the air.

For an instant Ocean lay blue and white beneath him, the whitecaps sharp and cold.

Changing, the bureaucrat fell to the sea. ●

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.....	Nov	320	—— "Time Considered As a Helix of Lavender Ribbon" (s)	Mid-D	46
.....	Dec	192	Wilder, Cherry "A Woman's Ritual" (s)	Dec	76
.....	Mid-D	192	Williams, Walter Jon "Elegy for Angels and Dogs" (na) ...	May	104
Swanwick, Michael <i>Stations of the Tide</i> Part One (se)	Mid-D	110	—— "Solip: System" (na)	Sep	138
Tem, Melanie "Reunion" (n) ..	Nov	188	Willis, Connie "Cibola" (s)	Dec	18
Tiedemann, Mark W. "Targets" (n)	Dec	54	Yolen, Jane "Tintagel Morning: Song" (p)	Apr	64
Turzillo, Mary A. "Mage and Lady" (p)	Jan	133			
Vande Velde, Vivian "Suddenly" (p)	Nov	154			
Warren, K. C. "Binary Star" (p)	Sep	128			



OF COURSE, IT'S NOT WISE TO LOOK DIRECTLY INTO A NUCLEAR EXPLOSION. TO BE ON THE SAFE SIDE, TAKE AN OATMEAL CAN AND POKE A SMALL HOLE IN ONE END...

FIFTH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD

Well, another year has gone whistling by, and *that* means that once again its time for our Readers' Award poll, now in its fifth year (five years *already*? Whew!).

Most of you know the drill by now. For those of you who are new to this, I should explain a few things.

We consider this to be our yearly chance to hear from *you*, the readers of the magazine. That's the whole point behind this particular award. What were *your* favorite stories from Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine last year? This is *your* chance to let us know what novella, novelette, short story, poem, cover art, and interior art you liked best in 1990. Just take a moment to look over the index of the stories published in last year's issues of *Isfm* (pp. 185-188) to refresh your memory, and then list below, in the order of your preference, your three favorites in each category. (In the case of the two art awards, please list the *artists* themselves in order of preference, rather than the individual covers or interior illustrations—with the poetry award, however, please remember that you are voting for an individual *poem*, rather than for the collective work of a particular poet that may have appeared in the magazine throughout the year.)

Some further cautions: Only material from 1990-dated issues of *Isfm* is eligible. And only material that was actually published in *Isfm* itself is eligible (you may think that this is so elementary that it goes without saying, but you should have seen some of the ballots we've received in the past!). Each reader gets *one* vote, and *only* one vote. If you use a photocopy of the ballot, please be sure to include your name and address; your ballot won't be counted otherwise. Works must also be categorized on the ballot as they appear in the **Index**. No matter what category you think a particular story ought to appear in, we consider the Index to be the ultimate authority in this regard, so be sure to check your ballots against the Index if there is any question about which category is the appropriate one for any particular story. In the past, voters have been careless about this, and have listed stories under the wrong categories, and, as a result, ended up wasting their votes. All ballots must be postmarked no later than February 1, 1991, and should be addressed to: Readers' Award, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10168-0035.

Remember, *you*—the readers—will be the only judges for this award. No juries, no panels of experts. *You* are in charge here, and what *you* say goes. In the past, voter response has been good, and some categories have been hotly contended, so every vote counts. Don't let it be *your* vote for *your* favorite stories that goes uncounted! Some years, that one vote might have made all the difference, so don't put it off—vote today!

The winners will be announced in an upcoming issue.

BEST NOVELLA:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST NOVELETTE:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST SHORT STORY:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST POEM:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

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1. _____
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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The holiday lull is on us, so here's the annual look ahead to Winter's cons. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When calling cons, tell why you're calling right off. When writing cons, enclose an SASE (and say what it's for). Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, playing a musical keyboard.

DECEMBER 1990

14-16—**Conline**. For info, write: % A. Cox, St. John's College, Oxford OX1 3JP, UK. Or call (703) 273-3297 (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Oxford England (if city omitted, same as in address), at Oxford Polytechnic. Guests include: Ramsey Campbell. Theme: "SF and Society."

28-30—**EveCon**. (301) 292-5231. At the Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza, Arlington VA (near Washington DC).

JANUARY 1991

25-27—**ConFusion**, % AASFA, Box 8284, Ann Arbor, MI 48107. (313)971-0264. Friesner, Wood, Somtow.

25-28—**SwanCon**, Box 318, Nedlands WA 6009, Australia. 382-1833, 447-7545. Freeway, Perth.

FEBRUARY 1991

1-3—**Arisla**, Box 2334, 1 Kendall Sq., #322, Cambridge (near Boston) MA 02139. Jack L. Chalker, Bob Walker.

1-3—**Treble**, 18 Glynde Rd., Brighton, E. Sussex, BN2 2YJ, UK. National annual SF folksinging con.

8-10—**PsurrealCon**, OK Mem. Union, Room 215A, Norman OK 73019. Lackey, D. L. Anderson.

15-17—**Boskone**, Box G, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139. (617) 625-2311. Springfield MA. Mike Resnick.

15-17—**CostumeCon**, % Condon, Box 194, Mt. Airy MD 21771. Baltimore MD. Costumers' annual do.

22-24—**Reconnalsance**, 5 St. Andrew's Rd., Carshalton, Surrey SM5 2DY, UK. New Work/Ideas in SF.

28-Mar. 3—**World Horror Con**, Box 22817, Nashville TN 37202. (615) 226-6172. C. Yarbro, Bauman.

MARCH 1991

1-3—**ConSonance**, % Box 29888, Oakland CA 94604. Gytha North, Rilla Hestlin. An SF folksinging con.

8-10—**LunaCon**, Box 338, New York NY 10150. D. Brin, F. Kelly-Freas, the Ballantines, Hal Clement.

21-24—**AggieCon**, Box J-1, MSC, College Station TX 77844. (409) 845-1515. Over 3000 are expected.

22-24—**MillenniCon**, Box 636, Dayton OH 45405. C. J. Cherryh, Joe Patrouch, Dr. Bill Breuer.

28-31—**NorwesCon**, Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124. (206) 248-2010. Usually 100+ pros (writers, etc.).

AUGUST 1991

29-Sep. 2—**ChiCon V**, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690. WorldCon. Clement, Powers. \$95 to 12/31/90.

SEPTEMBER 1992

3-7—**MagiCon**, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 275-0027. The '92 World SF Con. \$75 to 3/31/91.

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